



## Strategy, 2019-2023

### SUMMARY

#### AIMS

Over the next four years, we will aim to:

- A Increase the number of members to about 100, appropriately distributed across the eight voice sections.
- B Increase the diversity of the choir by seeking to recruit new younger members.
- C Sustain, develop and promote Milton Keynes Chorale as a friendly, welcoming, sociable choir that is open to new singers and provides flexible opportunities for members to contribute, whilst maintaining the commitment, discipline and hard work needed for high musical standards and the pride and joy that comes with reaching them.
- D Perform to a high standard that attracts favourable independent reviews from audiences and professional musicians.
- E Become a choir that promotes and values its collective musical development and the musical development of its members.
- F Offer a musical programme that conveys creativity and imagination, combines tradition with innovation, is challenging for singers and rewarding for audiences.
- G Continue to present four concerts a year, with greater flexibility in the use of soloists and instrumental ensembles as financial outcomes improve, and at least one concert with full orchestra in a four-year period.
- H Build and enrich our relationships with our local musical, cultural and civic communities.
- I Build our public profile in the Milton Keynes area.
- J Widen member engagement in the development and day to day management of the choir.

- K Ensure the choir's financial sustainability, including the resources to support the achievement of this strategy.
- L Prepare a prioritised implementation plan for this strategy and report annually to members on progress.

## ACTIONS

In order to achieve these aims, we will take the following actions:

- A1 Develop and implement a plan to recruit more basses, tenors and second altos.
- A2 Review the rules governing participation in rehearsals for those not singing in the immediately forthcoming concert.
- A3 Explore with other choirs, particularly non-auditioned community choirs, the possibility of activities and events to enable their members to try out singing with the Chorale.
- B1 Make contact with music educators working with young people aged 16-25 across the city to explore the musical opportunities offered by membership of the Chorale.
- B2 Explore how we can engage younger singers returning home to Milton Keynes after graduation, and students at local universities.
- C1 Produce free name badges for members.
- C2 Establish a self-funding annual social programme approved by the Board and managed and promoted by a Social Committee composed of members who are not current role-holders.
- C3 Introduce a periodic online choir survey that includes questions about how far the choir reflects the personality and ethos it aspires to.
- C4 Review our concert dress and, in consultation with members, choose a style that better reflects our personality and ethos.
- D1 Introduce a voice appraisal process designed to enable the MD and AMD to better understand the vocal qualities of members, to re-assign members to voice sections where appropriate, and to provide information about the profile of members' singing skills and ability to read music.
- D2 In voice sections not the subject of targeted recruitment (Action A1), only appoint new members who will enhance the potential standard of the relevant voice section. In voice sections subject to targeted recruitment, only appoint new members at a standard which at least matches the potential standard of the voice section.
- E1 Introduce an internal concert review process, including invited professional reviewers and opportunities for member and audience feedback.

- E2 Introduce optional skill development sessions for members, matched to the skill profile of the choir, established through voice appraisal and self-assessment, supported where appropriate by online resources.
- E3 Explore the feasibility and benefits of participation in non-competitive choral festivals.
- F1 Ensure that programme choices offer the diversity and degree of innovation that members seek, whilst ensuring that events meet their financial targets.
- G1 Monitor the financial outcomes of concerts and, where it is prudent, revise targets upwards to provide greater flexibility in the use of soloists and instrumental ensembles.
- G2 Subject to financial sustainability, sponsor or take part in a large-scale concert with full orchestra at least once in every four-year period.
- H1 Embed Come and Sing events/choral workshops as a regular feature of our annual programme.
- H2 Explore the potential of links to the Milton Keynes Creative and Cultural Strategy and with Milton Keynes Arts and Heritage Alliance, Milton Keynes Music Hub, Arts Central, Milton Keynes Community Foundation and other relevant local coordinating bodies.
- H3 At least once a year, open one rehearsal to families, friends and the general public.
- I1 Continue to develop and monitor the effectiveness of the choir's website in building the choir's public profile.
- I2 Increase our social media presence and use of social media advertising in a sustainable way.
- I3 Build a library of sound clips of the choir's performances, accessible through the website.
- I4 Explore the option of engaging a celebrity singer with household name status for a concert in the next three years.
- J1 In implementing this strategy and in other ways, take opportunities to enable members to contribute their time and skills to the management and development of the choir through the design of specific, concrete and time-limited tasks.
- K1 Confirm Christ the Cornerstone as the choir's rehearsal venue for the period of this strategy.
- K2 Raise subscription fees to reflect CPI inflation over a four-year period, subject to member approval of any increases at an AGM.
- K3 Continue to improve and invest in event marketing and brand awareness.

- K4 Develop plans for and implement a voluntary donation scheme for members.
- K5 Investigate the option of project funding to support Actions A3, B1 and H1.
- K6 Invite members to offer their services to form a Fundraising Committee, reporting to the Board.
- K7 Identify and approach potential sponsors amongst local businesses, in return for programme and banner advertising at events.
- L1 Prepare an annual prioritised implementation plan and associated financial appraisal, and from October 2020 submit to the membership for approval at the AGM.
- L2 Report annually to the membership in the implementation of this strategy, as part of the Annual Report.
- L3 Ensure that all actions involving communication with members are through channels that permit all members to participate.

## INTRODUCTION

1. This strategy sets out our aims for the four-year period, October 2019 to September 2023, and the actions we will take in order to achieve those aims. It does not attempt to capture everything that the choir does that makes up its regular activities, and nor does it prevent the choir from taking up opportunities over the next four years that are not mentioned in this strategy. The primary purpose of the strategy is to give the choir a sense of direction and development, and a means by which we can evaluate our progress in our chosen direction.
2. The strategy builds on the consensus about the nature of the choir established in the *Guiding Document* and *Code of Conduct*, both approved unanimously by members in October 2018. The *Guiding Document* is attached to this strategy as an appendix.
3. In developing the strategy, members were invited to contribute their views on the key issues it addresses through a consultation process in April and May 2019. A series of five one-hour long discussion sessions were held, in which members were invited to discuss four questions:
  - How would you describe the personality of the choir as you would ideally like it to be?
  - How would you describe the musical standard of the choir as you would ideally like it to be?
  - What would be the characteristics of an ideal Milton Keynes Chorale season?
  - What should members be expected to contribute to the choir's financial sustainability?
4. Many members subsequently submitted individual contributions in response to these questions, and submitted other ideas on what the strategy should contain. Further contributions were made by 28 members who commented on a draft of the strategy prior to approval. This process yielded a rich and creative resource of ideas and opinions from which this strategy has been built. Fortunately, a broad consensus emerged on the key issues, and this strategy reflects that consensus.
5. The strategy begins with a brief account of the choir as it is in 2019. It then addresses our ambitions for:
  - the future size and composition of the choir;
  - the personality and ethos of the choir;
  - the musical standards we aspire to;
  - the nature of the musical programme we should offer;
  - our relationship with the wider local community;

- our internal organisation;
  - the implementation of this strategy.
6. Each section begins with a set of one or more broad aims (A-L), and ends with a set of actions (A1-L3) to give effect to those aims. Each action is linked to an aim with its letter. Of course, many actions will actually support a number of different aims.

## THE CHOIR IN 2019

7. Milton Keynes Chorale (MKC) was founded in September 1974. Over its long history, it has been recognised as one of the two leading large choral ensembles in the Milton Keynes area, making an important contribution to musical and cultural life in the city.

## ACTIVITIES

8. Each year, the choir presents four concerts, usually one per school term and one for Christmas. In recent years, we have also begun to offer a regular annual workshop or *Come and Sing* event. Concerts are presented in a number of venues in and around Milton Keynes, most often parish churches. Larger venues - Milton Keynes Theatre and The Venue, Walton High - have also been used.
9. Programmes cover the sacred and secular and cover the full spectrum of the classical choral repertoire, with music ranging from the early baroque to contemporary. We use professional soloists, and concerts are generally accompanied by professional players. Accompaniment ranges from a single organist or pianist, through trios and quartets, to chamber ensembles and, less often, a full symphony orchestra.
10. Concert audience size and demographics have not been systematically tracked in the past. Audience sizes at smaller concerts in churches are typically in the range 90 – 120, with a recent concert reaching about 160. Since the great majority of tickets are sold by choir members to their family and friends, the demographic composition of audiences tends to match that of choir members.
11. Rehearsals take place weekly during term time on Tuesday evenings at the church of Christ the Cornerstone, Central Milton Keynes.
12. In recent years, the choir's activities have predominantly been independent of the activities of other choirs and cultural groups, although many members also sing or play in other musical groups. The exception until recently has been our link to Danesborough Chorus, the other large classical choir in our area. A long-standing pattern of regular large-scale joint concerts presented by the two choirs in Milton Keynes Theatre came to an end in 2017, although there remains an agreement between the two choirs that such joint concerts might be proposed in future by

either choir. A joint concert sponsored by MKC has been fixed for June 2020 when Elgar's *The Dream of Gerontius* will be performed. Links have also been re-established recently with Milton Keynes Youth Choir: a joint performance of Messiah and a joint Christmas concert are planned for December 2020. The choir has also invited Polymnia, the area's foremost chamber choir, to provide the semi-chorus for *The Dream of Gerontius*.

13. Although the choir has in the past toured in the UK and overseas and has taken part in competitions, activities outside Milton Keynes have not featured in recent years. The last choir tour, to Mantua, took place in 2013.
14. The choir has periodically supported local charities, including Willen Hospice, by singing to raise funds, but activity to benefit good causes does not form a core part of its activities. Although many members are active in local civic life and voluntary organisations, systematic links between the choir and the civic life of Milton Keynes are very limited.

## MEMBERSHIP

15. Choir membership is open to anyone who demonstrates musical ability to the standard required by the Musical Director at audition, pays the annual subscription fee (£180 in 2018/19) and accepts the choir's *Code of Conduct*. On 1st October 2019, there were 93 members (one not currently active) in the eight voice sections:

Soprano 1	22	42
Soprano 2	20	
Alto 1	17	26
Alto 2	9	
Tenor 1	6	9
Tenor 2	3	
Bass 1	9	16
Bass 2	7	
All members	93	

16. Demographic data on members, such as age and ethnicity, is not recorded but the membership is predominantly mature in years, and overwhelmingly white British.

## PERSONALITY AND ETHOS

17. The *Guiding Document*, which summarises the character of the choir and the responsibilities and benefits of membership, says that membership offers: "high musical standards, enjoyment, and the deep satisfaction of making great music together. Entry is by audition, but we are not and do not aim to be an elite choir. We include all those who seek the benefits we offer and are committed to fulfilling the responsibilities that go with them." The document is attached to this

strategy as an appendix. The benefits and responsibilities describe a choir that is committed to high musical standards and its own musical development, disciplined in pursuit of these ambitions, but also participative, friendly and inclusive.

## ORGANISATION

18. MKC is a Charitable Incorporated Organisation under the Charities Act 2011. Its objects, recorded in the constitution are: “to advance, improve, develop and maintain public education in, and appreciation of, the art and science of music in all its aspects by any means the trustees see fit, including through the presentation of public concerts and recitals”.
19. The choir is under a professional Musical Director, Mark Jordan, and a professional Assistant Musical Director, Alex Aitken, who also acts as accompanist. The administration and management of the choir is the responsibility of the Board of Trustees, elected by the members, with a maximum membership of 11. The Trustees are aided by a number of members who have specific roles but are not Board members: Music Librarian, External Music Hire Officer, Box Office Manager, Rehearsal Refreshments Co-ordinator and Voice Representatives for each section of the choir. There are other roles currently vacant, including a Concert Refreshments Co-ordinator and a Stewarding Team Co-ordinator.

## FINANCE

20. MKC is financially stable and its current pattern of activities is financially sustainable in the long term. The trustees have adopted a policy of maintaining reserves at £12,000 or greater. Current and forecast reserves are well above this threshold. Income is predominantly composed of member subscriptions and ticket sales. Except in years when the choir promotes a large-scale concert in Milton Keynes Theatre, subscription income exceeds ticket income by a factor of between 2 and 3. Expenditure divides into two principal elements: recurrent costs associated with rehearsals and choir administration, and those associated with concerts.
21. Subscription fee income reliably exceeds costs associated with rehearsals. Ticket income falls short of concert costs by a considerable margin. Concerts are classified into four types: small scale with piano/organ, small scale with trio/quartet, small scale with ensemble and large scale with orchestra. Financial planning assumes that all concerts, except the Christmas concert, make a loss, and the trustees have set a target financial outcome for each concert type. Losses on concerts are covered by surplus subscription fee income after rehearsal costs have been met.

## MEMBERS' VIEWS

22. In 2018 members of the Chorale were invited to respond to a survey designed to provide insights into their motivations for being in the Chorale, their views on the choir as it is at the moment, and on how it should develop in future.
23. It was found that membership was an important source of personal satisfaction for members and for some, it played an important role in their social life. Members valued making music together with others and developing their musical skills and knowledge through singing with the choir. Performing in concerts was a vital part of the choir experience for most, but not all members. A majority saw large scale concerts and working with professionals as important.
24. There was a range of views on the choir's musical standards and how well it worked together as a unit. A substantial proportion of members thought that the choir was capable of more than it was achieving at the time and were cautious about how its quality was viewed by others. Whilst most members thought the choir should aspire to establishing its reputation beyond Milton Keynes, many felt that there was work to do to strengthen its position locally. But most members thought the choir struck a healthy balance between being inclusive and achieving high standards.
25. The great majority of members saw it as their own responsibility to develop their singing skills. A smaller majority thought that members worked hard in rehearsals. A substantial minority thought they themselves could usefully do more preparation for rehearsals at home, although almost everyone thought the choir could reach higher standards if members did more work at home.
26. Members thought the subscription fee was good value for money. There was a range of views on whether members and the Board did enough to publicise concerts and sell tickets, but the great majority thought that marketing and sales was a shared responsibility of the members and the Board.
27. In setting expectations for members in future, most thought members should be able to understand musical notation and terminology, and should have some ability to sight-read music. There was majority support for some form of re-auditioning to maintain quality, very little support for more demanding entry standards, and widespread support for strengthening the choir through recruitment.
28. Members wanted to see the choir being more creative in the choice of repertoire, drawing on a range of genres. There was limited support for sticking to well-known classical pieces, although most thought the choir should choose music that would attract large audiences. The majority of members would welcome working with younger singers from time to time.

## SIZE AND COMPOSITION

### AIMS

- A Increase the number of members to about 100, appropriately distributed across the eight voice sections.**
- B Increase the diversity of the choir by seeking to recruit new younger members.**

## SIZE AND VOICE MIX

29. The choir has been larger in the past than it is in 2019. Membership declined rapidly from 121 in 2014 to 92 in 2017. This decline coincided with a period of general instability for the choir with a rapid succession of musical directors. Since 2017, the total number of members has been relatively stable, with small numbers joining and leaving each year.
30. Since the choir depends substantially on member subscription fees for its financial sustainability, there is an obvious interest in increasing membership. On the other hand, a very large choir presents logistical challenges. As membership increases, so does the number of members singing in each concert, and the choice of venues and cost of staging may be adversely affected. A major campaign to recruit many new singers would prove time-consuming and potentially expensive, and is not necessary for financial sustainability.
31. Nevertheless, there is some room for overall growth, so a target size of about 100 singers has been chosen. The target is deliberately approximate, to provide flexibility to cope with any particular opportunities and circumstances that may arise.
32. In 2019, the choir is significantly out of balance across voice sections, with 45% sopranos, 28% altos, 10% tenors, and 17% basses. There is also an imbalance between the two parts of the alto section. The possibility of fixed upper limits on the number of members in each voice section, whether the four main sections, or eight 'sub-sections', has been rejected, since it could lead to excellent new singers being unable to join the choir. Instead, it should be left to the MD and AMD to make recruitment decisions in the light of the individual skills of the applicant and the overall balance in the section and choir. To address the imbalance, however, we do need to take action to recruit tenors, basses and second altos.
33. The number singing in each concert has varied over the past five concerts (not including Christmas) between 54 (59%) and 71 (77%). Some members have voiced concern that the reduction in numbers as a concert approaches can affect their performance, having adapted to a larger ensemble during rehearsals. The change in number of singers also presents challenges for the MD and AMD in ensuring the best possible performance. An earlier rule was that members not singing in a concert were asked not to attend the last two rehearsals prior to concert day. It

would be appropriate to review this matter to ensure the appropriate balance between member participation in rehearsals and performance quality.

## AGE BALANCE

34. In common with most choral societies around the UK, MK Chorale's average membership is mature in years. This is the result of a number of factors. Membership demands a regular and substantial commitment that is difficult for many people of working age, especially those with family responsibilities, to meet. Many years of neglect and under-funding of musical education in schools has probably limited the pool of potential members with the requisite musical skills and confidence. The choir has a reputation for high standards which less experienced singers may be unsure that they can meet, and there are no clear pathways for people from other groups to extend their musical skills and experience, build their confidence that they may be able to sing in an auditioned choir, and try out Chorale membership. The choir's relatively limited presence in recent years in the civic life of the city may also be an issue.
35. To counterbalance these factors, we need to take action to recruit young singers and singers of working age. However, caution will be needed; we should not seek to compete with other choirs for members, but rather to provide a pathway for singers to develop and broaden their musical lives. Recently, the choir has begun to welcome younger singers studying music A level, who have been encouraged to join by the AMD, who has extensive networks in local music education. There is scope to expand this initiative. We should also explore whether we can engage people who sang in choirs at University and have recently returned to Milton Keynes, and whether there is a pool of potential members at universities in the area and local performing arts organisations and beyond the period of this strategy, MK:U, whose first students are due to begin their studies in 2023.

### ACTIONS

- A1 Develop and implement a plan to recruit more basses, tenors and second altos.
- A2 Review the rules governing participation in rehearsals for those not singing in the immediately forthcoming concert.
- A3 Explore with other choirs, particularly non-auditioned community choirs, the possibility of activities and events to enable their members to try out singing with the Chorale.
- B1 Make contact with music educators working with young people aged 16-25 across the city to explore the musical opportunities offered by membership of the Chorale.
- B2 Explore how we can engage younger singers returning home to Milton Keynes after graduation, and students at local universities.

## PERSONALITY AND ETHOS

### AIM

**C Sustain, develop and promote Milton Keynes Chorale as a friendly, welcoming, sociable choir that is open to new singers and provides flexible opportunities for members to contribute, whilst maintaining the commitment, discipline and hard work needed for high musical standards and the pride and joy that comes with reaching them.**

36. There is wide consensus amongst choir members about the personality and ethos that MK Chorale should aspire to have. Whilst members generally think that the present reality matches their aspiration reasonably well, many members also feel that there is room for the choir to get closer to its ideal personality.
37. In the consultation process that led up to the production of this strategy, two contrasting clusters of expressions frequently recurred. In one group, there were adjectives such as friendly, supportive, sociable, warm, inclusive, joyful, relaxing, open, lively, and welcoming. In the other group were expressions such as disciplined, professional in outlook, willing to do homework, organised, hardworking, not slapdash, challenging, committed. Members want their choir to have a personality and ethos that reflects both these groups of expressions, and generally think that it already has this to a considerable extent.
38. In a membership organisation where ultimate power lies with the members, it must be primarily for each member herself or himself to sustain, develop and promote the choir's personality and ethos through their contributions in rehearsals and at home. It also falls to those in leadership positions in the choir – the MD, AMD and the Board - to model and reflect that personality and ethos in all their actions. But there are also some organisational actions that will help members to make their own individual contributions:
- a) Members tend to know other members in their own sections better than they know those in other sections, and it can be difficult for new members to get to know others, since opportunities for informal interaction are limited at rehearsals and concerts. We could help people learn names by providing re-usable free name badges for members.
  - b) We need more opportunities for members, especially newer members, to spend time with other members socially. Most simply, periodic opportunities for members to get to know each other in rehearsals could be offered. Rushed rehearsal coffee breaks are not ideal for this purpose. Although separate social activities take place from time to time – quizzes, summer walks and barbecues - the choir does not have a consistent annual social programme. We should establish this as a regular feature of the life of the choir, organised by a Social Committee reporting to the Board. This committee should consist of members who are not current role-holders, in order to widen engagement in

the management and development of the choir. The committee's main task would be to present an annual social programme, approved by the Board, with at least three events each year. Activities on the programme could be organised by any choir member, not just those on the Social Committee. Although the primary purpose of the social programme should be to support the choir's personality, it could also contribute to choir funds. It should at least be self-funding.

- c) Periodically, we should remind ourselves of the personality and ethos we aspire to, and monitor our collective behaviour against that aspiration through a simple online survey which asks members to assess the extent to which we are matching up to our aspirations. Such a survey will enable us to track our progress and to consider other actions we might need to take, not only in support of our personality and ethos, but other elements of this strategy as well.
- d) Our concert dress is formal and traditional, and in the eyes of many members, does not reflect the many positive features of our personality and ethos. We should review it to find a style that better reflects our aspirations and has the support of members.

#### ACTIONS

- C1 Produce free name badges for members.
- C2 Establish a self-funding annual social programme approved by the Board and managed and promoted by a Social Committee composed of members who are not current role-holders.
- C3 Introduce a periodic online choir survey that includes questions about how far the choir reflects the personality and ethos it aspires to.
- C4 Review our concert dress and, in consultation with members, choose a style that better reflects our personality and ethos.

## MUSICAL STANDARDS

#### AIMS

- D Perform to a high standard that attracts favourable independent reviews from audiences and professional musicians.**
- E Become a choir that promotes and values its collective musical development and the musical development of its members.**

39. After a period of instability in which it was widely felt by members that the choir's musical standard had declined, there is general agreement amongst members that the quality of the choir's performance is much improved and improving in 2019. Members want their choir to perform to a standard that will bring

admiration from audiences and pride from singers in our collective achievement. On the other hand, members know that we are a mixed-ability choir, and there would be little support for actions that excluded some long-standing members with, for example, limited ability to read music, who might not now be accepted if they applied as new members.

40. Our strategy needs to reflect both members' aspiration to perform to the highest possible standards, and the importance attached to remaining an inclusive organisation. The key to this lies in taking actions that ensure that new members contribute to raising our musical standards, that we make the best use of members' existing skills, and that we provide opportunities for members to develop their musical knowledge and skill.

### MAKING THE BEST USE OF MEMBERS' SKILLS

41. Re-auditions have been a controversial subject in the choir. Some members feel strongly that they can play an important role in improving our musical standard. Many also recognise the anxiety that they can provoke, including in some long-standing members. Some of the controversy arises from uncertainty as to the purpose of the exercise. Are they to winnow out members who no longer meet the expected standard? Are they to give the MD and AMD a better understanding of the spectrum of singing ability in the choir? We need a process that helps the choir to improve its performance standard, but which does not undermine the personality and ethos we aspire to, set out in Aim C. For this, 'voice appraisal' is a better term than 're-audition'. Voice appraisal should be used to enable the MD and AMD to better understand the vocal qualities of members, to identify singers who may need to be reassigned between voice sections, to inform the MD's and AMD's work in rehearsals, and to identify skill gaps that could be addressed through voice coaching or tuition on musical notation. It should not be used to require or encourage members to leave the choir because they no longer meet the standard demanded. There should be no pass or fail level in the voice appraisal process.

### ENTRY STANDARDS

42. The choir's *Code of Conduct* says that membership of the choir is open to those who have demonstrated singing ability to the standard expected by the Musical Director through audition. We have not attempted to define the level of singing ability required, and it is probably not helpful to do so. But to ensure that each new member makes a positive contribution to the choir's musical standard, and given that the choir is not at current risk of dropping in size, new members in voice sections that are not the subject of targeted recruitment (Action A1) should be expected to sing at a standard that will raise the potential standard of the relevant voice section. Where a voice section is the subject of targeted recruitment (bass, tenor and alto 2), new members should be expected to sing at a standard that at least sustains the potential standard in the voice section.

## LEARNING AND DEVELOPING

43. It is vital that the choir as a whole, and every member individually, is committed to learning and developing as singers. No member should be a 'passenger', and no member should feel, at the end of each concert, that they have learnt nothing in preparing for it. By far the most important factors in ensuring that we have such a learning culture, are the commitment, hard work, and mutual support of members, and the skills, personalities and positive attitudes of our MD and AMD. In their contributions to the development of this strategy, there were many members who said that the choir is on its way towards having a learning culture, but there were comments that this varied between voice sections and was not a universal characteristic in all members. The role of this strategy should be to ensure that as an organisation we take actions that strengthen our learning culture, and provide opportunities for members to develop their musical skills.
44. Musical development depends on honest supportive feedback. That is difficult to offer individual members in rehearsal and performance, but it is entirely practicable for the choir as a whole. At the moment, the feedback that we receive following concerts is informal, and can be haphazard. We do not conduct audience or member surveys following concerts; we do not invite professional reviews; we do not conduct any structured evaluation on the basis of which the MD, AMD and Board could take action to improve the standard of future concerts. We should introduce an internal concert review process as part of our normal performance process including invited professional reviewers, such as our patron, Jean Rigby, and opportunities for member and audience feedback.
45. In their input to the development of this strategy, several members said they would welcome opportunities for skill tuition. Some members said that they would like to improve their own music reading skills, others said that they would like to improve their sight-reading. To support members' skill development, we should establish optional skill development sessions, supported where appropriate by online resources, designed to address needs identified through voice appraisal and through member self-assessment. The funding, structure and timing of this will need careful consideration to maximise member participation. There may be opportunities to engage members as leaders as well as participants.
46. Another option advocated by a number of members was to begin to sing again beyond Milton Keynes and its region. In the past, the choir has participated in amateur choral competitions and festivals, and has toured occasionally, most recently in 2013 to Mantua. Opinion on the option of a tour in a European destination was recently canvassed amongst members and concrete proposals are under development. The option of singing in non-competitive choral festivals has not been explored in recent years. It has the potential to support the choir's musical development and help to raise our performance standard, so should be explored in more depth to establish its feasibility and assess the potential benefits. Member opinion is probably not in favour of the choir singing

competitively, and the MD and AMD consider that competitions are unlikely to support the musical development of the choir.

#### ACTIONS

- D1 Introduce a voice appraisal process designed to enable the MD and AMD to better understand the vocal qualities of members, to re-assign members to voice sections where appropriate, and to provide information about the profile of members' singing skills and ability to read music.
- D2 In voice sections not the subject of targeted recruitment (Action A1), only appoint new members who will raise the potential standard of the relevant voice section. In voice sections subject to targeted recruitment, only appoint new members at a standard which at least sustains the potential standard of the voice section.
- E1 Introduce an internal concert review process, including invited professional reviewers and opportunities for member and audience feedback.
- E2 Introduce optional skill development sessions for members matched to the skill profile of the choir, established through voice appraisal and self-assessment, supported where appropriate by online resources.
- E3 Explore the feasibility and benefits of participation in non-competitive choral festivals.

## MUSICAL PROGRAMME

#### AIMS

- F Offer a musical programme that conveys creativity and imagination, combines tradition with innovation, is challenging for singers and rewarding for audiences.**
- G Continue to present four concerts a year, with greater flexibility in the use of soloists and instrumental ensembles as financial outcomes improve, and at least one concert with full orchestra in a four-year period.**

47. There is a broad consensus amongst members about the musical programme and the mix of concerts that we should offer. Members seek a mix of the familiar and the unfamiliar, the more serious and the lighter, chorale classics and new works, the secular and the sacred. Members are conscious of the need to attract audiences with familiar 'crowd pleasers', but equally want to sing works that will challenge the choir and surprise and delight audiences with hitherto unknown or unfamiliar music. Many members seek a repertoire that will be a learning experience for them. In this sense, our programming choices should reflect our

aim to become a choir that promotes and values its collective musical development and the musical development of its members. There is a strong sense amongst members that the programming choices made in recent years by our MD and AMD are moving the choir firmly in this direction.

48. There is a broad consensus that the choir should retain its current pattern of four concerts a year, one shortly before Easter, one in late June, one in late Autumn and one at Christmas. Concerns about the financial position of the choir in recent years have led to more financially cautious decision-making, with rather less use of soloists and instrumental ensembles, and fewer large-scale concerts with full orchestra than many members would wish to see. To the extent that the choir can continue to attract larger audiences and keep its costs under control, there should be scope gradually to make more use of soloists and instrumental ensembles, although the Board will need to continue to exercise financial prudence to ensure the choir's long-term financial sustainability.

## REPERTOIRE

49. Within the context of the consensus described above, captured in Aim F, there is scope for experimentation and innovation, and a number of ideas were advanced by members during the development of this strategy. These included:
- continuing to offer themed concerts, including seasonally themed events;
  - continuing to draw the best music from a wide range of musical genres;
  - opportunities for audience participation in concerts other than at Christmas;
  - commissioning and premièring new works from young and rising composers.
50. These ideas combine to demonstrate member support for continued musical diversity and innovation in our programming.

### ACTIONS

- F1 Ensure that programme choices offer the diversity and degree of innovation that members seek, whilst ensuring that events meet their financial targets.
- G1 Monitor the financial outcomes of concerts and where it is prudent, revise targets upwards to provide greater flexibility in the use of soloists and instrumental ensembles.
- G2 Subject to financial sustainability, sponsor or take part in a large-scale concert with full orchestra at least once in every four-year period.

## THE CHOIR AND ITS COMMUNITY

### AIMS

**H Build and enrich our relationships with our local musical, cultural and civic communities.**

**I Build our public profile in the Milton Keynes area.**

51. Milton Keynes Chorale is increasingly working with other choirs and their members, in addition to its long-standing partnership with Danesborough Chorus. Links have been re-established with the Milton Keynes Youth Choir. Our next large-scale concert will involve Polymnia as well as Danesborough Chorus. Recent workshops and *Come and Sing* events have been well attended by singers from many different choral groups. These developments signal a growing openness to the musical community around us and an increasing awareness of the benefits for the choir of a wider and deeper engagement with our musical, cultural and civic communities. Action A3 will give a further boost to these links. In developing this strategy, members offered extensive support for this trend to continue.
52. Although the choir has established relationships with some other local choirs, as an organisation we have very limited links with the wider musical, cultural and civic life of Milton Keynes. Individual members have extensive links with other musical, voluntary and statutory bodies in the local community, but not as representatives of the choir. In recent years, our relationship to our wider community has been almost entirely restricted to Christmas fundraising, either for the choir itself or for local charities, notably Willen Hospice. Our relative isolation means that we may be missing opportunities to build audiences, develop our public profile through performance at city events, to attract potential members, raise funds, and collaborate in shared projects with other music and arts groups. As a first step, we should establish (or re-establish) contact with the city's music and cultural networking organisations and funding bodies: Milton Keynes Borough Council, Milton Keynes Arts and Heritage Alliance, Milton Keynes Music Hub, Arts Central and Milton Keynes Community Foundation. With each of these bodies, and with any others that may be appropriate, we should explore ways in which we can work with and through them to support the implementation of this strategy. We should take particular account of the Milton Keynes Creative and Cultural Strategy, designed to achieve Project 6 of Milton Keynes Futures 2050, entitled *The Creative and Cultured City*.
53. Another practical step that we can take to build relationships with the wider community is to invite family members, friends, members of other choirs and the general public to a rehearsal, at least once a year. In the long term, we would expect this to support our recruitment aims (A and B).
54. The choir's public profile, like any organisation today, depends to a great extent on its online and social media presence. During 2018-19, the Board invested time

and resources in the redevelopment of the choir's website, bringing it to a standard that reflects the personality and quality that we have already achieved and to which we aspire. We will need to continue to develop the website, keep it fresh and track its record in attracting visitors and links. Some action has been taken to build our social media profile through Twitter and Facebook, but there remains scope for further development, not just by posting messages, but also through the use of social media advertising. Unlike many choirs, we have no online samples of our performances; this should be corrected.

55. Although we are well-known as a choir amongst other singers and classical musicians in Milton Keynes, we are not very visible beyond this relatively narrow group. Wider knowledge of our work is likely to bring benefits in the long term through larger concert audiences, and access to opportunities to perform locally that might not otherwise be available. On the other hand, building our public profile is potentially time-consuming and expensive, and needs to fit with our normal programme and activities. One approach we should explore is engaging a nationally renowned 'celebrity' singer who is a 'household name' to perform with and for us. This could attract a very large audience, and so as well as improving our public profile, could return a substantial financial benefit.

#### ACTIONS

- H1 Embed *Come and Sing* events/choral workshops as a regular feature of our annual programme.
- H2 Explore the potential of links to the Milton Keynes Creative and Cultural Strategy and with Milton Keynes Arts and Heritage Alliance, Milton Keynes Music Hub, Arts Central and Milton Keynes Community Foundation and other relevant local coordinating bodies.
- H3 At least once a year, open one rehearsal to families, friends and the general public.
- I1 Continue to develop and monitor the effectiveness of the choir's website in building the choir's public profile.
- I2 Increase our social media presence and use of social media advertising in a sustainable way.
- I3 Build a library of sound clips of the choir's performances, accessible through the website.
- I4 Explore the option of engaging a celebrity singer with household name status for a concert in the next three years.

## ORGANISATION

### AIM

#### **J Widen member engagement in the development and day to day management of the choir**

56. The choir depends entirely on its members' voluntary activity for its survival and prosperity. Members have recognised this in approving the *Guiding Document* which assigns to all members the responsibility to: 'share (in small ways) in the practical work of organising rehearsals and concerts.' However, the bulk of the organisation, management and day to day operation of the choir falls to the trustees and other role-holders. This is as it should be: not all members have the spare time to take on additional roles, and committee work is not for everyone. At each concert, a number of members volunteer with tasks on the day, such as setting out staging and providing refreshments. But between these two, there are relatively few opportunities for members to take on time-limited and manageable small tasks that contribute to the success of the choir, such as acting as Voice Representative. The establishment of a Social Committee (Action C2) will expand these opportunities, but more could be done. The Board will need to be alive to opportunities to form task groups to take on specific time-limited activities and encourage members to contribute.

### ACTION

- J1 In implementing this strategy and in other ways, take opportunities to enable members to contribute their time and skills to the management and development of the choir through the design of specific, concrete and time-limited tasks.

## FUNDING

### AIM

#### **K Ensure the choir's financial sustainability, including the resources to support the achievement of this strategy**

57. The choir's financial position is secure and sustainable with the programme and of events and mix of concerts that is currently planned. At the current subscription fee level, inflation-adjusted in future years, and with audience sizes that match concerts over the past few years, the choir is in a position to offer four concerts a year in smaller venues with a mix of piano/organ, trio/quartet and instrumental ensemble accompaniment, and to afford good quality soloists. Depending on the financial performance of the regular concert programme, it is likely that a large-scale concert in Milton Keynes Theatre with a full symphony orchestra, promoted by the choir, will be affordable once every four years.

58. This strategy implies the investment of additional resources in member recruitment, voice appraisal, professional reviewers, member skill development, more frequent use of larger ensembles, and more frequent large-scale concerts. These additional costs will need to be funded. This implies either a transfer of existing resources, or increasing income.
59. The choir's expenditure falls into two main categories: costs arising from concerts, and those arising from rehearsals. The choir's current financial health is due in part to improved control of concert expenditure, and this will need to be sustained. But further reductions in concert costs are unlikely to support the achievement of the aims set out in this strategy. On the contrary, the strategy implies rising concert expenditure. On the rehearsal side, the Board has explored moving to a cheaper rehearsal venue in some depth, and there have been two trials of alternative venues. Neither trial has been successful, and there remains strong member support for remaining at Christ the Cornerstone. There is no indication that any other rehearsal venue is viable, and so further exploration of alternatives is not proposed in the period of this strategy. This, in itself, should support the implementation of the strategy by boosting members' confidence in the future and upward trajectory of the choir.
60. In developing this strategy, members were invited to comment on a number of ways in which additional income could be raised. These included increased subscription fees, stronger expectations on members to sell tickets, a rehearsal fee on top of the subscription fee and voluntary top-up fees.
61. Ultimately, in a membership organisation, it is the members who decide what the subscription fee should be. At £180 per year in 2019, with approximately 38 rehearsals per year, this amounts to less than £5 per two-hour rehearsal for access to professional singing tuition and all the other benefits set out in the choir's *Guiding Document*. To ensure financial sustainability, over a four-year period, the subscription fee should rise in line with inflation measured by CPI, subject to member approval of any increases at an AGM.
62. Member contributions in the early stage of developing the strategy indicate no clear consensus on how any additional costs should be funded, but there was majority opposition to one option: further raising expectations on members to sell tickets by whatever means, was not supported.
63. There are signs that the financial performance of concerts is beginning to improve. If this is sustained, it is likely to be the result of a mix of four factors: effective cost control by the MD, AMD and trustees, improved marketing, closer attention to maximising Gift Aid on subscription fees, and the growing confidence of the choir in its own quality, leading to greater confidence in marketing concerts and selling tickets. We will need to ensure that all four factors continue. It will be particularly important to continue to develop our capability in marketing events and increasing brand awareness.

64. But it would not be wise to depend entirely on better financial outcomes from concerts to fund this strategy. Other methods are likely to be required. Until the implementation plan is developed and costed, firm decisions on the mix of funding cannot be taken, but we can prioritise different methods. The following priorities are proposed:

- a) A voluntary donation scheme for members.
- b) Project grant funding for those actions in this strategy that could be deemed to have wider community benefit (A2, B1 and H1).
- c) Fundraising activities organised and run by members: in developing the strategy, members produced a wealth of small-scale fundraising ideas, which, combined, have the potential to make a significant contribution to income. However, realising these will depend on whether there are members who are in a position to form a Fundraising Committee, reporting to the Board, to plan and organise events and engage other members in running individual activities. We should aim to raise funds from sources beyond members and their families and friends.
- d) External event sponsorship.

#### ACTIONS

- K1 Confirm Christ the Cornerstone as the choir's rehearsal venue for the period of this strategy.
- K2 Raise subscription fees to reflect CPI inflation over a four-year period, subject to member approval of any increases at an AGM.
- K3 Continue to improve and invest in event marketing and brand awareness.
- K4 Develop plans for and implement a voluntary donation scheme for members.
- K5 Investigate the option of project funding to support Actions A3, B1 and H1.
- K6 Invite members to offer their services to form a Fundraising Committee, reporting to the Board.
- K7 Identify and approach potential sponsors amongst local businesses, in return for programme and banner advertising at events.

## IMPLEMENTATION

### AIM

- L Prepare a prioritised implementation plan for the strategy and report annually to members on progress.**

65. This strategy is intended to cover activities over a four-year period. Once approved, the Board will need to identify which actions are to be implemented in the first year and the priorities to be attached to them. At the end of each season, the Board will report to the members on the implementation of the agreed actions for the year, as part of its Annual Report, and will propose priorities for the coming season.
66. As identified earlier, funding the implementation of this strategy will depend on some mix of existing resources, increases in ticket income, or other sources of funding, whether from members or external sources. Work will be needed to plan the detailed implementation of most actions before we are in a position to identify the additional funding required. A financial appraisal for each season will be prepared alongside the selection of actions for implementation in that year.
67. A number of actions involve online communication with members. Email, social media and web-based communication is now the default communication channel and meets the needs of most members. However, it will be important to ensure that whatever method is chosen does not inadvertently make engagement for some members more difficult than it should be.

### ACTIONS

- L1 Prepare an annual prioritised implementation plan and associated financial appraisal, and from October 2020 submit to the membership for approval at the AGM.
- L2 Report annually to the membership in the implementation of this strategy, as part of the Annual Report.
- L3 Ensure that all actions involving communication with members are through channels that permit all members to participate.

## Appendix: Guiding Document

Milton Keynes Chorale offers its members high musical standards, enjoyment, and the deep satisfaction of making great music together. Entry is by audition, but we are not and do not aim to be an élite choir. We include all those who seek the benefits we offer and are committed to fulfilling the responsibilities that go with them.

### WHAT YOU CAN EXPECT TO GAIN

In return for fulfilling the responsibilities of a member of the choir, you can expect to:

1. Experience the joy and deep satisfaction of making music together in rehearsal and performance.
2. Enrich the musical life of Milton Keynes and its hinterland.
3. Sing alongside committed, enthusiastic and experienced choral singers.
4. Meet like-minded people and make friends through singing together.
5. Rehearse under the direction of a professional Musical Director and Assistant Musical Director.
6. Contribute to up to four performances of choral music each year.
7. Share performances with professional soloists, instrumentalists and orchestras.
8. Develop your singing skills by working and learning with others, led by professional choral musicians.
9. Develop your wider musical skills and knowledge.
10. Learn of opportunities to participate in other musical events.
11. Be kept informed by the choir's Board about its work on behalf of the members.
12. Help to shape the work and future of the choir through your active participation.
13. Have the opportunity to play your part in the organisation and management of the choir.

## WHAT IS EXPECTED OF YOU

To gain the benefits of membership, you will be expected to:

1. Meet the choir's entry standards through audition.
2. Work together to achieve the highest musical standards within our capabilities.
3. Make a positive effort to get to know the singers around you.
4. Help other members to get the most out of their membership.
5. Prepare for rehearsals at home by getting to know the music and learning your part.
6. Sing and learn in rehearsals, weekly in school term-time.
7. Help create successful rehearsals through care, commitment, and attention.
8. Sing in concerts, unless you really can't be available.
9. Participate in periodic voice appraisal.
10. Observe the choir's Codes of Conduct for rehearsals and performances.
11. Share (in small ways) in the practical work of organising rehearsals and concerts.
12. Help the choir run smoothly by being punctual and responding promptly to requests for information.
13. Keep yourself well informed about the choir's programme of activities and your role in them.
14. Sell tickets for concerts and workshops to your friends and family
15. Help to publicise concerts and workshops in your local community
16. Pay the annual subscription promptly.