



SOCIAL CONNECTEDNESS  
FELLOWSHIP PROGRAM

# **Harnessing the Power of the Arts in Building Social Connectedness**

How the Royal Opera House Thurrock Community Chorus Found its  
Voice



© ROH/Brian Slater

By Eloïse O'Carroll

Social Connectedness Fellow 2018

Samuel Centre for Social Connectedness

[www.socialconnectedness.org](http://www.socialconnectedness.org)

May 2018

In partnership with the Royal Opera House



## Table of contents

<b>USEFUL ACRONYMS.....</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>EXECUTIVE SUMMARY.....</b>	<b>3</b>
KEY RECOMMENDATIONS.....	3
<b>I – INTRODUCTION .....</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>II - THE ROYAL OPERA HOUSE .....</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>III- THE ROYAL OPERA HOUSE IN THURROCK .....</b>	<b>7</b>
QUALITY OF LIFE IN THURROCK .....	8
THE HIGH HOUSE PRODUCTION PARK.....	8
COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT .....	10
<b>IV- THE ROYAL OPERA HOUSE THURROCK COMMUNITY CHORUS.....</b>	<b>11</b>
AN UNEXPECTED INCEPTION .....	11
“GIVING ORDINARY PEOPLE AN EXTRAORDINARY CHANCE” – GARY, CHORUS MEMBER .....	12
THE ROYAL OPERA HOUSE DEMOCRATISING THE ARTS THROUGH COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT .....	15
CHORUS PROFILES.....	16
Gary: “Singing and art bring people together” .....	16
Sarah: “The Chorus is the one thing that makes us not want to move out to the countryside.” .....	16
<b>V- THE CASE FOR INVESTING IN COMMUNITY ARTS PROGRAMMES: AN ANTIDOTE TO LONELINESS.....</b>	<b>17</b>
WHY DOES IT EVEN MATTER? WHY WE SHOULD ADDRESS LONELINESS? .....	17
<i>Loneliness has serious consequences on health and wellbeing.....</i>	<i>17</i>
<i>Loneliness weighs on the health and social care systems .....</i>	<i>18</i>
<i>Loneliness negatively impacts the economic stability of society.....</i>	<i>18</i>
<i>Those at the bottom of the socioeconomic ladder are more likely to be lonely.....</i>	<i>18</i>
<b>VI- KEY RECOMMENDATIONS .....</b>	<b>19</b>
THE CASE FOR PRESCRIBING SINGING.....	19
RECOMMENDATIONS .....	20
<b>VII- CONCLUSION.....</b>	<b>21</b>
<b>ACKNOWLEDGMENTS .....</b>	<b>22</b>
<b>BIBLIOGRAPHY .....</b>	<b>23</b>

## **Useful acronyms**

**HHPP:** High House Production Park

**ONS:** Office for National Statistics

**ROH:** Royal Opera House

**ROHTCC:** Royal Opera House Thurrock Community Chorus

**UK:** United Kingdom

## **Executive Summary**

Through the lens of the successful Royal Opera House Thurrock Community Chorus, this case study illustrates importance of the arts, notably singing, in deriving social connectedness. Social connectedness encompasses the quality and number of connections an individual has in its social circle, involving family, friends, neighbours and acquaintances.

In the light of a serious loneliness epidemic affecting people of all ages and backgrounds in the United Kingdom, it is time to act. Loneliness is detrimental to one's health and wellbeing, which in turn weighs on the health and social care systems, impacting economic stability.

Replicable and scalable grassroots arts programmes, such as the Royal Opera House Thurrock Community Chorus, are a solution to prevent and alleviate loneliness, benefitting society as a whole. Below you will find anecdotes from interviews with Chorus members that corroborate evidence that community led activities improve individuals' health & wellbeing and sense of belonging.

## **Key recommendations**

- 1) Arts, health and social care sectors with the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, Department for Education, Department of Health and Social Care, Department for Communities and local governments should develop a strategy to promote and finance arts and culture programmes to support individuals' health & wellbeing and to prevent and alleviate loneliness.
- 2) The government, in its English loneliness strategy to be published 2018, should make loneliness a health priority and endorse community-based solutions to act against it.
- 3) Funds should be distributed to the voluntary and community sector for non-medical treatment, including social prescribing.

- 4) NHS England, the Social Prescribing Network and local authorities should incorporate more arts prescriptions into their agendas.
- 5) More primary care practitioners should be trained in social prescribing to increase prescription rates.
- 6) Research on social prescribing should be strengthened by the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence to know what works best and how.
- 7) Public-private sector partnerships should be developed to invest and scale community arts and cultural programmes.

## **I – Introduction**

It is paradoxical that in our increasingly interconnected society, more and more of us feel lonely, disconnected or left behind.

Loneliness is subjective and can be defined as an “unwelcome feeling of lack or loss of companionships, which happens when we have a mismatch between the quantity and quality of social relationships that we have, and those that we want”.<sup>1</sup> We often associate it with social isolation, but people can feel lonely and isolated even when surrounded by others.

In 2014, Britain was named “Europe’s capital of loneliness” as its inhabitants were less likely to know their neighbours or have strong friendships than people anywhere else in the EU, and a high proportion of inhabitants had no one to rely on in a crisis.<sup>2</sup> Today, over 9 million of adults are often or always lonely and, as the late Jo Cox said, “Young or old, loneliness doesn’t discriminate.”<sup>3</sup>

### *How can community led arts and culture programmes improve people’s lives?*

This case study will demonstrate and reflect upon the exemplary success of the Royal Opera House Thurrock Community Chorus (ROHTCC) in harnessing the power of arts, more specifically singing and music, to build a sense of belonging and improve health and wellbeing. Bringing communities together prevents and alleviates loneliness, while benefitting society as a whole.

---

<sup>1</sup> Daniel Perlman and Letitia Anne Peplau, *Chapter 2: Toward a Social Psychology of Loneliness* (London: Academic Press, 1981).

<sup>2</sup> John Bingham, “Britain the loneliness capital of Europe”, *The Telegraph*, 18 June 2014

<sup>3</sup> Jo Cox Loneliness “A call to action”, December 2017



## II - The Royal Opera House

*The Royal Opera House Covent Garden, as we know it today, has long evolved in its form and function since the patent delivered by Charles II during the Restoration leading to its inception. To understand how the ROHTCC materialised, it is useful to look at the Royal Opera House's history.*

Today, the present theatre in Central London, is the third building on the site where an old convent garden once existed.<sup>4</sup>

In 1728, John Rich, an actor and manager at Lincoln's Inn Field, commissioned *The Beggar's Opera* from John Gay. The piece's success provided the funds for the first Theatre Royal at Covent Garden in 1732.<sup>5 6</sup>



© Russ London, English Wikipedia

For close to a century, the theatre was mainly used as a playhouse presenting spoken drama. Several of the first musical works heard at Covent Garden were Handel's operas.<sup>7</sup> For around 25 years, until his death in 1759, he gave regular seasons and many of his operas and oratorios were written for Covent Garden or had their first performance there. He bequeathed his organ to John Rich, but it burnt in a fire that destroyed the theatre in 1808.<sup>8</sup>

A new building was opened in September 1809 and the price of admission increased to recover the cost. The move was so unpopular that audiences disrupted performances by beating sticks and covering actors' voices with 'boos'. The famous Old Price riots lasted nearly three months. A committee was appointed to investigate the accusation that the proprietors made excessive profits. In fact, it was estimated that with the old admission prices, they were losing money.

---

<sup>4</sup> Frances Donaldson, *The Royal Opera in the twentieth century*, (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, c1988)

<sup>5</sup> Royal Opera House Collections Online, "The History of the Royal Opera House"

<sup>6</sup> Frances Donaldson, *The Royal Opera in the twentieth century*, (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, c1988)

<sup>7</sup> Royal Opera House Collections Online, "The History of the Royal Opera House"

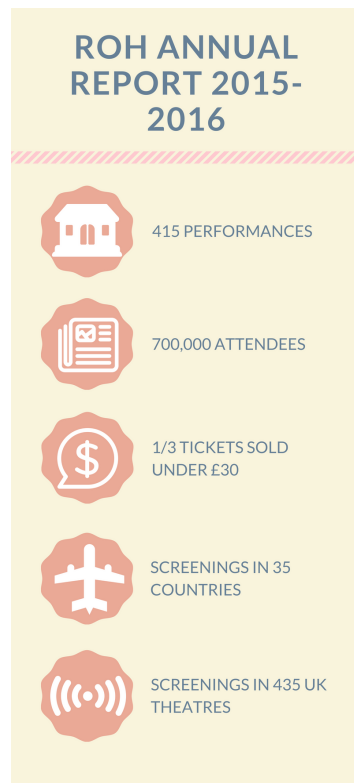
<sup>8</sup> Survey of London: Volume 35, *The theatre Royal, Drury Lane, and the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden* (London: London County Council, 1970)

Despite this, the disorders continued and in December 1809, the management was forced to meet the audience's demand and restore the old prices.<sup>9</sup>

Then the Theatres Act of 1843 broke the monopoly of drama at the Royal Theatre. Her Majesty's Theatre, in Haymarket, was previously the centre for ballet and opera. That year, an argument broke out between its conductor, Michael Costa, and the management. He transferred his allegiance to Covent Garden and brought most of his company singers with him. Four years later, the auditorium was remodelled and the theatre reopened as the Royal Italian Opera House in April 1847 with a performance of Rossini's *Semiramide*.<sup>10</sup>

However, during the early hours of the morning following a *bal masque* in March 1856, a fire broke out and destroyed the theatre for the second time. The third and present building, designed by Edward Barry, the son of the architect of the Houses of Parliament, reopened in May 1858 featuring almost as many seats as the previous theatre and a large stage and auditorium.

The theatre became the Royal Opera House in 1892 to reflect its increasingly French and German repertoire.<sup>11</sup> During the Great War, the theatre was requisitioned by the Ministry of Works to be used as a furniture depository. In World War II, the opera house was used as a *Palais de Danse*, run by Mecca Cafés who leased the theatre.<sup>12</sup>



In July 1944, the music publishers Leslie Boosey and Ralph Hawkes signed a five-year lease of the opera house. Under the Covent Garden Opera Trust, and with the help of a subvention from the newly established Arts Council of Great Britain, the opera house commenced its successful post-war career. The Royal Opera House reopened in February 1946 with a performance of the Sadler's Wells Ballet of *The Sleeping Beauty*.

Today, the Royal Opera House "aims to enrich people's lives through opera and ballet".<sup>13</sup> It is today home to two artistic companies, The Royal Opera and The Royal Ballet, performing with the Orchestra of the Royal Opera House.

The ROH has long evolved since its creation close to 300 years ago. It remains an internationally acclaimed institution but has

<sup>9</sup> ibid

<sup>10</sup> ibid

<sup>11</sup> Royal Opera House website, "History"

<sup>12</sup> Harold Rosenthal, *Opera at Covent Garden: A Short History*, (London: Gollancz, 1967)

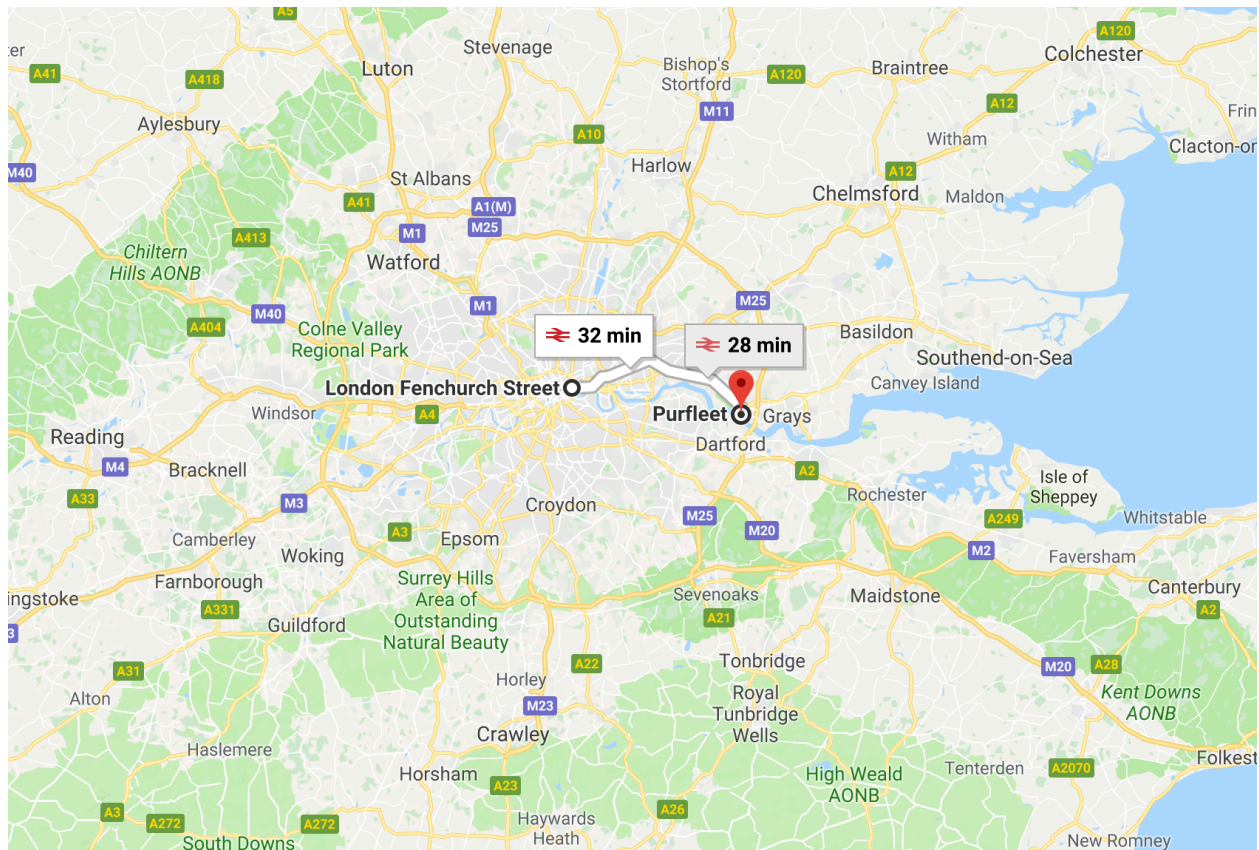
<sup>13</sup> The Royal Opera House website, "The Annual Report, 2015/16"

geographically expanded to render the arts accessible to all. In 2010, it ended its London hegemony and opened a new site in the borough of Thurrock, Essex, paving the way for an array of local programmes.

### III- The Royal Opera House in Thurrock

Thurrock is a unitary authority area with borough status located in the English county of Essex. It is part of the London commuter belt and is an area of regeneration within the Thames Gateway redevelopment zone, a corridor of opportunity that has been identified by the government as the area with greatest development and commercial potential in the country.<sup>14</sup>

In 2011, at the time of the latest census, its population was 158,300. The Office of National Statistics estimated that by 2021, it would rise to 175,000.<sup>15</sup>



Google Maps

<sup>14</sup> Thurrock Trailblazer, “2015/16 Evaluation Report”, online

<sup>15</sup> Thurrock government, “Thurrock facts and statistics”, online

## Quality of life in Thurrock

Deprivation: According to the 2015 Index of Multiple Deprivation, Grays Thurrock, where the ROHTCC rehearsals take place, ranks in the top 25% most deprived areas in England, as measured by income, employment, health, education, barriers to housing and services, crime and living environment.<sup>16</sup> Furthermore, Grays also ranks as one of the top ten most polluted places in the UK.<sup>17</sup>

Life satisfaction: In the first Office for National Statistics wellbeing survey in 2012, Thurrock recorded the lowest levels of life satisfaction in any place in the UK.<sup>18</sup>

Employment: In comparison with the nationwide average, its representation of managers and professional occupations is close to 10 percentage points less than in the rest of the country. On the other hand, machine operators are overrepresented.<sup>19</sup>

Education: In Thurrock, people have fewer top qualifications than in the rest of the country. Only about 25% of those aged 16-64 holds National Vocational Qualification 4 or higher qualifications, versus close to 40% in Great Britain.<sup>20</sup> Furthermore, 12% of the borough has no qualification, whereas in the country as a whole, those with no qualification is 7.7%.<sup>21</sup>

Industry: Purfleet, a town in Thurrock, is only half an hour away from the City of London by train, however the borough's economic landscape is quite different than its close neighbour. Industry at one end of the Thames includes a Unilever chilled distribution centre, a Procter & Gamble plant making detergents and soap and a plant making industrial chemicals and aluminous cement as opposed to financial services.

## The High House Production Park

In 2005, London won the bid to host the 2012 Olympics.<sup>22</sup> The ROH production facilities, then located in Bow in East London, were forced out to make way for the Olympic Village.

The ROH was looking for a new workshop space to house their set, costume and wig making facilities used for productions in Covent Garden, when they discovered the High House site in

---

<sup>16</sup> UK Local Area website, Grays Thurrock Deprivation Index

<sup>17</sup> BBC News website, "UK's most polluted towns and cities revealed", 4 May 2018

<sup>18</sup> Lizzy Davies, "It's one big cesspit here: Thurrock, the country's capital of misery", *The Guardian*, 25 July 2012

<sup>19</sup> Official Labour Market Statistics website, "Labour Market Profile – Thurrock"

<sup>20</sup> *ibid*

<sup>21</sup> *ibid*

<sup>22</sup> BBC Sport website, "London beats Paris to 2012 Games", 6 July 2005



Purfleet, Thurrock. The Grade II listed old farm, whose grounds include a listed barn and dovecote, had been previously used as a school and converted into flats before laying unused until 2007.



High House

For several years, organisations worked together to develop the High House Production Park on the 14-acre site. These stakeholders include the Arts Council England East, East of England Development Agency, High House Community Group, National Skills Academy for Creative & Cultural Skills, Royal Opera House, Thurrock Borough Council and the Thurrock Thames Gateway Development Corporation.<sup>23</sup> After a £60 million renovation, the High House Production Park opened to the public in December 2010.

The ROH's website states that:

***"it is a unique development that seeks to create a cluster of creative and cultural enterprises drawn from the backstage, technical and live music sectors."***<sup>24</sup>

The Bob and Tamar Manoukian Costume Centre holds over 20,000 costumes from the ROH repertory, with over 6,000 items from their historic collection. These include items worn by the

---

<sup>23</sup> Royal Opera House website, "Thurrock",

<sup>24</sup> ibid

famous Greek American soprano Maria Callas and Margot Fonteyn, an acclaimed English ballerina.

A few metres away lies the impressive Bob and Tamar Manoukian Production Workshop, opened in October 2015.<sup>25</sup> The building provides the ROH with state of the art facilities to create stage scenery for Covent Garden productions.



The Costume Centre and Production Workshop

The site is also home to the United Kingdom's first ever National Skills Academy for technical and stage crafts for the performing arts and live music industries. The ROH is the Production Park's main resident and the site is shared between several arts organisations, including The Backstage Centre, a production and rehearsal venue for hire, artists' studios, community space, and business and workshop space.

### Community involvement

The ROH hosts several programmes in Thurrock to *"enrich the cultural life of the local community"* by supporting the learning and creativity of people of all ages.<sup>26</sup>

Public tours of the Production Workshop and Costume Centre are held every Friday for those interested in learning about the ROH and its activities in Thurrock.

In partnership with South Essex College and University of the Arts London, the ROH has established a new Bachelor of Arts (Hons.) degree course in Costume Construction, delivered at the Costume Centre as well as an apprentice scheme. In 2012, the ROH created ROH Bridge to

---

<sup>25</sup> *ibid*

<sup>26</sup> Royal Opera House website, "Thurrock",

connect schoolchildren and young people to art and culture in Essex, North Kent, Hertfordshire and Bedfordshire. “Through research, advocacy and co-investment, we nurture networks, share learning and foster innovation within the education, arts and culture sector – particularly in communities where there is limited provision or experience.”<sup>27</sup>

Two years later, following a request by Thurrock Council, the ROH Learning and Participation team, and ROH Bridge, founded Thurrock Trailblazer to deliver cultural education in schools in the area.

Finally, the Royal Opera House Thurrock Community Chorus (ROHTCC) was born out of a sustained interest for community involvement through chorus singing.

#### **IV- The Royal Opera House Thurrock Community Chorus**

##### **An unexpected inception**

In December 2010, the UK Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport, alongside the national press and Thurrock council leaders, made their way to Purfleet for the opening of the Royal Opera House’s Bob and Tamar Manoukian Production Workshop.<sup>28</sup>

To mark the opening, the specially commissioned Purfleet Opera performed *Ludd and Isis* in the empty Production Workshop. Written, made and staged by members of the Thurrock public, with help of ROH professionals, *Ludd and Isis* inaugurated the High House Production Park (HHPP).

The opera told the tale of two gods of the Thames: Isis, queen of the upper river, and her husband, Ludd, king of the lower river. Ludd attempts to impress his queen and show his passion for creativity and enterprise by building a new production park but is unconvincing in showing off his success to his queen. Eventually, Ludd decides to couple creativity with industry, wedding the traditional with the new. The ‘People’s Chorus’ was the fruit of the marriage, tying in all the elements of the estuary and it was performed by nearly 200 Thurrock citizens and ROH professionals.<sup>29</sup> Beaming with metaphor, the Purfleet Opera of *Ludd and Isis* symbolised the espousal between the ROH’s Central London roots and its expansion in industrial Thurrock.

---

<sup>27</sup> Royal Opera House website, “Royal Opera House Bridge”

<sup>28</sup> Demos, “Made in Thurrock: assessing the social impact and conditions for success of the Royal Opera House in Thurrock”, September 2011

<sup>29</sup> *ibid*



Following the triumph of the Purfleet Opera, members enquired how they could locally pursue their involvement with the ROH. 81-year-old Mike told me that after Ludd and Isis, about “50 or 60 of us founding members of the Purfleet Opera, aged 8 to 80, called in a meeting in the Barn and asked ‘what if we can get the ROH to run a community chorus?’”

Their wish was granted and the ROHTCC was formed in 2011, engaging Jeremy Haneman as Musical Director. Jeremy was also appointed Musical Director of the ROH Chorus, a professional body of chorus members singing in Covent Garden and around the world.

Today, the ROHTCC is a community opera chorus of around 140 members. Anyone above the age of 8 who lives, works, volunteers or studies in Thurrock is welcome to join, regardless of their background, ability and musical instruction and 10% of members report as having a learning or physical disability. To join, no audition is required. The Musical Director and Assistant Musical Director, Ashley Beauchamp, allocate members to one of the eight voice sections after hearing them sing. Currently, the majority of Chorus members are over 55 years old.

*To gain a deeper understanding of the Chorus, and with the kind help of Alexandra Godfree, Project Manager, Community Engagement at the Learning and Participation team at the ROH, seven members agreed to be interviewed to share their experience with the Chorus. All interviews were conducted in March and April 2018.*

***“Giving ordinary people an extraordinary chance” – Gary, Chorus member***

It is clear that the ROHTCC is not a typical community chorus. First of all, the repertoire, chosen by the Musical Director and Assistant Musical Director in consultation with the ROH and the Chorus members, is mainly opera. Opera choruses also involve elements of drama, movement, staging and costume that are not always featured in a choir.



ear. (Picture: © ROH).

The Chorus covers an average of 12 pieces per year and performs them from memory in their original language, may it be English, French, Russian, Italian or Greek to cite a few. Every piece is contextualised before being translated and it is ensured the pronunciation is mastered. Prior to joining the Chorus, many members had no musical education or singing experience. While some can read music, many do not and learn the music by

***“Because it is so much more difficult and the pieces are more complex than pop songs, it is more fulfilling when you perform.” - Anonymous***

Furthermore, the ROHTCC benefits from its unique relationship with Covent Garden. The Chorus has worked with many leading soloists and theatrical artists from the ROH, especially with members of the Jette Parker Young Artists Programme. They have commissioned numerous works for community choruses including a song on the theme of migration. The Chorus has done flash mobs at Covent Garden and recorded a charity Christmas single with KT Tunstall and others for the Jo Cox Foundation<sup>30</sup>. As well as performing in Thurrock, the Chorus has appeared on the Main Stage at the ROH, at the Barbican’s Milton Court and at the Southbank Centre among other places. In addition, most have been on trips to the ROH Covent Garden to attend private rehearsals or training days.

Strikingly, those interviewed highlighted the inherent welcoming and social nature of the group.

Eddy is a gregarious man who loves the social aspect of the chorus and is always “at the front, greeting people when we have open evenings. It’s horrible when you don’t know anyone and don’t know what to do when you first join.” He maintains that everybody is encouraging and supportive of one another.

<sup>30</sup> Together Productions website, “Projects: Royal Opera House”

As a case in point, he mentions the award he created for people who help others in the Chorus, in memory of a friend's passing (who used to be part of the Chorus). "The Chorus brings people together," asserts Mike, the 81-year-old veteran of the group. "My friendship group is through the Chorus. We're involved in each other's lives," mentions another member.



Madeline, Ankie, Gary and Mike

Singing in a group benefits individual wellbeing. One interviewee drew upon their past negative experience with bullying and how they found solace in music. "I suffer from severe anxiety, I



constantly have negative thoughts in my mind. Yet, I'm in the zone with music: it gives me peace of mind and clarity. I get lost in the beauty of the music when singing ecstatic pieces."

"As long as the Chorus is here, I'm going to stay in this area. I have thought of moving but no, these are my people", says the member, of fellow singers. "I am always worried the Chorus would end. That is my biggest fear."

### The Royal Opera House democratising the arts through community involvement

As symbolised by the Ludd and Isis metaphor, the ROH brilliantly weaned its way into a mostly working class and industrialised borough. It is on track to achieve its goal of making the arts more accessible. Mike shared that, "the ROH and HHPP have made Thurrock more culturally aware", and he mentions the popular annual live summer transmissions from Covent Garden that take place in the orchard in Purfleet, attracting 400 people.



Chorus members rehearsing

While some Chorus members had heard of the ROH before joining, they were mostly weary because they felt like it was not "for them". Ankie said she knew nothing about opera. "I had an image of it being dramatic, based on stories and things that are relevant to people 300 years ago. I was proved wrong!"

A member confided that "we really need art in the world, it brings people playfulness. When I saw *La Bohème* with the Chorus in Covent Garden, I thought 'this is a wonderful fantasy'. People need that joy and escapism. I know of the ROH before it came to Thurrock but I never imagined I would ever be involved with it! It's a wonderful institution. People can flourish in institutions as they offer the structure and support for creative people to really thrive."

The ROHTCC is a pillar in the Thurrock community and is a place where friendships flourish during exhilarating performances. The singers are well aware of the positive impacts this community programme has on them. Madeline advanced that "singing should be prescribed. Any group activity is brilliant as worries fade into the distance. After a rehearsal, I come home feeling beaming!". Ankie adds that "[she] struggles learning music but it's an anti Alzheimer's challenge. You know more than you think you do and you surprise yourself when you don't have the book!"

*Gary: "Singing and art bring people together"*



*Sarah: "The Chorus is the one thing that makes us not want to move out to the countryside."*



"I joined the Chorus because I volunteered at the HHPP. I was part of outreach projects in the community and was recommended to take part in Ludd and Isis.

It was terrifying; I never thought of singing but I thought to myself 'I can't back out' as I had already committed.

Pushing yourself out of your comfort zone is a wonderful experience. Singing can affect your mood and positivity.

It helps with wellbeing. Singing and art bring people together. People are healthier and it relieves dementia. Singing is a real plus.

I have sung with the Jette Parker Young Artists on the ROH Main Stage – you couldn't pay for that experience!"

"I was lost when I moved here from the States ten years ago.

When I joined the Chorus, I had no idea what I was getting into. I could have been judged for not being good enough.

These people are the most welcoming. This is what made me feel part of the community, as my husband isn't from here either.

I thought the ROH was out of my league and class! I am embracing it now. Several of my work colleagues came to a performance a couple of years ago. They were so surprised they said 'wow, this is so much more than a community chorus, it's a professional performance!'"

I now realise how important this is. It's about connecting with the community using the arts and singing as outreach in helping in feeling inclusive".

## V- The case for investing in community arts programmes: an antidote to loneliness



Drawing from the conducted interviews, it is clear that not all Chorus members are lonely or socially isolated but all benefit from increased wellbeing, social connection and perhaps even happiness. The general sentiment is that members value the Chorus, singing and participating in community arts programmes as well as the social interactions, which have all lead to greater social connectedness.

Following interviews with seven Chorus members, nearly all of them reported that joining the Chorus was beneficial to their wellbeing. Without using the “L word”, several members have illustrated the need to address loneliness through developing and joining art community programmes. To support this anecdotal evidence, a number of studies bolster the argument.

### Why does it even matter? Why we should address loneliness?

#### **Loneliness has serious consequences on health and wellbeing**

Loneliness can increase blood pressure and heart disease, depression and cognitive decline. The Campaign to End Loneliness, a non-governmental organisation, highlights that the impact of loneliness on mortality and morbidity is similar to that of smoking 15 cigarettes a day<sup>31</sup>, excessive drinking and not exercising. Loneliness may also increase the chances of early death by around 26%.<sup>32</sup>

Social networks, such as the ROHTCC, can help reduce the risk of mortality or developing certain diseases and can also help individuals recover when they fall ill.<sup>33</sup>

---

<sup>31</sup> Holt-Lunstad et al., “Loneliness and Social Isolation as Risk Factors for Mortality: a Meta-Analytic Review”, *Association for Psychological Science*, (2015)

<sup>32</sup> Centre for research on environment, society and health, “Loneliness is an issue of inequality”, 28 July 2016

<sup>33</sup> Michael Marmot, Fair Society, Healthy Lives, the Marmot Review (London: The Marmot Review, 2010)

## Loneliness weighs on the health and social care systems

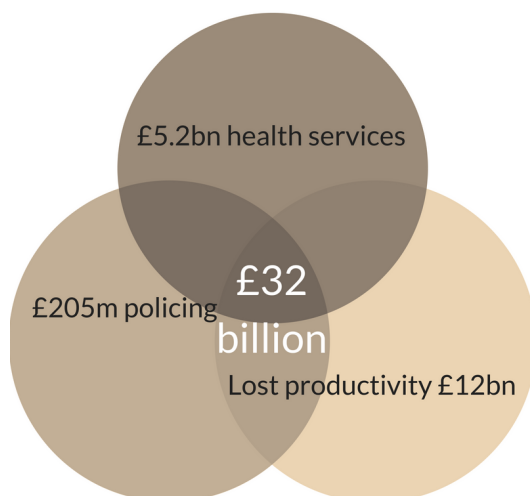
It is reported that most GPs in the UK see between 1 and 5 people a day who come because they are lonely, and one in 10 GPs sees between six and ten such patients daily.<sup>34</sup>

**“If nothing is done loneliness will inevitably take its toll on the entire healthcare system” - Helen Stokes Lampard, Chair Royal College of GPs.<sup>35</sup>**

Preventing and alleviating loneliness is essential for older people to remain as independent as possible. Lonely individuals are more likely to visit their GP, have higher use of medication and increased risk factors for long-term care.<sup>36</sup> They are also more likely to enter residential or nursing care and use accident and emergency services.<sup>37</sup>

Studies note the positive impact of participatory art programmes for older adults on overall health, loneliness, doctor visits, medication use and falls, reflecting how important social activities are in reducing risk factors driving the need for long term care.<sup>38 39</sup>

## Loneliness negatively impacts the economic stability of society



The loneliness epidemic costs UK employers £2.5 billion per year as quantified by employee turnover brought on by loneliness and loss of productivity.<sup>40</sup> Indeed, people who are lonely are five times more likely than others to leave their job within a year.<sup>41</sup>

Overall, disconnected communities could be costing the UK economy £32 billion every year.<sup>42</sup>

<sup>34</sup> Jo Cox Loneliness, “A call to action”, December 2017

<sup>35</sup> *ibid*

<sup>36</sup> Gene Cohen et al., “The impact of professionally conducted cultural programs on the physical health, mental health, and social functioning of older adult” *The Gerontologist* 46 (6), 2006

<sup>37</sup> John Geller et al, “Loneliness as a predictor of hospital emergency department sue”, *The Journal of Family Practice* 48 (10), 1999

<sup>38</sup> George Monbiot, “The town that’s found a potent cure for illness – community”, *The Guardian*, 21 February 2018

<sup>39</sup> Cohen et al, “The impact of professionally conducted cultural programs on the physical health, mental health, and social functioning of the older adult”, *The Gerontologist*

<sup>40</sup> Jo Cox Loneliness “A call to action”, December 2017

<sup>41</sup> The New Economics Foundation and the Co-Op, “The Cost of Loneliness to UK Employers”, February 2017

<sup>42</sup> Eden Project Communities, “The Cost of Disconnected Communities”, January 2017



## Those at the bottom of the socioeconomic ladder are more likely to be lonely

Loneliness affects everyone, but research shows that older people's loneliness can vary according to their level of wealth and those with the least are lonelier than the richest.<sup>43</sup> The pan-European study found that loneliness is also a social inequality issue: loneliness was around 10% more common in the poorest group than the richest group studies. Among the poorest groups, those who regularly participated in social activities face a similar risk of loneliness to the wealthiest groups. This suggests that participating in social activities can protect against and reduce loneliness.

## VI - Key recommendations

Following the Jo Cox Commission on Loneliness recommendations<sup>44</sup>, in January 2018 the Prime Minister set out measures to tackle loneliness and social isolation including appointing a ministerial lead on loneliness, dubbed the Minister for Loneliness, Tracey Crouch.<sup>45</sup>

Slowly but surely, loneliness is being acknowledged and destigmatised but more needs to be done to prevent and alleviate it. Social prescribing enables primary care practitioners the ability to refer people to a range of local, non-clinical services<sup>46</sup> such as community arts programmes. ROHTCC is part of the Thurrock Prescription Network but has yet to receive any referrals.

## The case for prescribing singing

- Singing in a choir is beneficial for an individual's psychological wellbeing, more so than singing solo.<sup>47</sup>
- Singing benefits the mental and physical condition of older people by reducing individuals' stress levels.<sup>48</sup>
- Engagement in creative and cultural activities makes the highest contribution to older people's wellbeing.<sup>49</sup>
- An arts-on-prescription project has shown a 37% drop in GP consultation rates and a 27% reduction in hospital admissions. This represents a saving of £216 per patient.<sup>50</sup>

---

<sup>43</sup> Centre for research on environment, society and health, "Loneliness is an issue of inequality", 28 July 2016

<sup>44</sup> Jo Cox Loneliness, "A call to action", December 2017

<sup>45</sup> Prime Ministers Office, "PM commits to government-wide drive to tackle loneliness" press release, 17 January 2018

<sup>46</sup> The King's Fund, "What is social prescribing?", February 2017,

<sup>47</sup> Nick Steward and Adam Lonsdale, "It's better together: the psychological benefits of singing in a choir", March 2016

<sup>48</sup> Katsuhisa Sakano et al, "Possible benefits of singing to the mental and physical condition of the elderly", *BioPsychoSocial Medicine* 8, 2014

<sup>49</sup> Alexandra Lamont et al., "Singing in later life: the anatomy of a community choir", *Psychology of Music*, May 2017

<sup>50</sup> All-Party Parliamentary Group on Arts, Health and Wellbeing, "Creative Health: The Arts for Health and Wellbeing", July 2017

- Each lonely older person could cost health and social care services up to £6,000 over 10 years.<sup>51</sup>
- Recent research undertaken by the London School of Economics found that £3 in health costs was saved for every pound spent tackling loneliness.<sup>52</sup>
- A social return on investment of between £4 and £11 has been calculated for every £1 invested in arts on prescription.<sup>53</sup>

## Recommendations

- 1) Arts, health and social care sectors with the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, Department for Education, Department of Health and Social Care, Department for Communities and local governments should develop a strategy to promote and finance arts and culture programmes to support individuals' health & wellbeing and to prevent and alleviate loneliness.
- 2) The government, in its English loneliness strategy to be published 2018, should make loneliness a health priority and endorse community-based solutions to act against it.
- 3) Funds should be distributed to the voluntary and community sector for non-medical treatment, including social prescribing.
- 4) NHS England, the Social Prescribing Network and local authorities should incorporate more arts prescriptions into their agendas.
- 5) More primary care practitioners should be trained in social prescribing to increase prescription rates.
- 6) Research on social prescribing should be strengthened by the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence to know what works best and how.
- 7) Public-private sector partnerships should be developed to invest and scale community arts and cultural programmes to democratise its access.

---

<sup>51</sup> David McDaid, Annette Bauer and A-La Parl, Personal Social Services Research Unit of the London School of Economics and Political Science, "Making the economic case for investing in actions to prevent and/or tackle loneliness: a systematic review" September 2017

<sup>52</sup> Public Health England, "Commissioning Cost-Effective Services for Promotion of Mental Health and Wellbeing and Prevention of Mental Ill-Health", August 2017

<sup>53</sup> All-Party Parliamentary Group on Arts, Health and Wellbeing, "Creative Health: The Arts for Health and Wellbeing", July 2017

## **VII- Conclusion**

The Purfleet Opera was not meant to live on after *Ludd and Isis*, yet the Royal Opera House Thurrock Community Chorus is testament that resilient communities can find their voices, and be heard.

Over the years, choir members have built social connectedness through singing, arming them against loneliness and its negative consequences. The intergenerational Chorus is also pivotal in instilling a sense of belonging in a borough nearly void of cultural opportunities, where quality of life is not the best, through democratising access to the arts.

To realise the potential of this antidote against loneliness, more private-public partnerships, similar to the ROHTCC's<sup>54</sup>, should be created to fight against the epidemic that is gripping the UK. Multi stakeholder partnerships between local authorities, grassroots movements and the private sector should take place and arts social prescriptions should increase.

The issue does not end here. Loneliness crosses borders: 40% of adults in the United States report feeling lonely.<sup>55</sup> Using the ROHTCC as an example, communities around the world could replicate and scale its model to benefit society as a whole.

In the UK at least, there is hope that the cross-government group appointed by the Minister for Loneliness will place arts social prescriptions high on their agenda in 2018.

---

<sup>54</sup> ROHTCC is funded by Thurrock Council and Kim Samuel.

<sup>55</sup> AARP, "Loneliness among Older Adults: A National Survey of Adults 45+", September 2010

## Acknowledgments

This case study would not have been possible without the generous support of Kim Samuel. Not only is she a pioneer, believer and driver of social connectedness, she is, among many other laudable attributes, a patron of the arts and of the Royal Opera House Thurrock Community Chorus and Thurrock Trailblazer. Your generosity is very much appreciated, thank you!

I am also grateful to Marina Jones, Alexandra Godfree and Molly Broughton whom I have had the pleasure to meet while researching the Royal Opera House. Thank you for taking the time to show me around – both in London and in Thurrock, to connect me with Chorus members, to answer my questions and give me advice.

Thank you to Jeremy Haneman and Ashley Beaumont for inspiring 140+ to sing!

I also wish to thank Jessica Matthews and Jonah Kanter for their patience and support throughout my fellowship. A special mention also goes to Bethany Brown - Researcher at the Health and Human Rights Division of Human Rights Watch - whose commitment and diligence in all she does I hope to replicate.

Last but not least, and most importantly, thank you to all the inspiring Chorus members who welcomed me when I visited and whose melodies enchanted me.

I would like to thank the seven members I interviewed; you know who you are - keep on singing and shining!

## **Bibliography**

- Alexandra Lamont et al., “Singing in later life: the anatomy of a community choir”, *Psychology of Music*, May 2017
- All-Party Parliamentary Group on Arts, Health and Wellbeing, “Creative Health: The Arts for Health and Wellbeing”, July 2017
- AARP, “Loneliness among Older Adults: A National Survey of Adults 45+”, September 2010
- BBC News website, “UK’s most polluted towns and cities revealed”, 4 May 2018
- BBC Sport website, “London beats Paris to 2012 Games”, 6 July 2005
- Centre for research on environment, society and health, “Loneliness is an issue of inequality”, 28 July 2016
- Cohen et al, “The impact of professionally conducted cultural programs on the physical health, mental health, and social functioning of the older adult”, *The Gerontologist*
- Daniel Perlman and Letitia Anne Peplau, *Chapter 2: Toward a Social Psychology of Loneliness* (London: Academic Press, 1981).
- David McDaid, Annette Bauer and A-La Parl, Personal Social Services Research Unit of the London School of Economics and Political Science, “Making the economic case for investing in actions to prevent and/or tackle loneliness: a systematic review”, September 2017
- Demos, “Made in Thurrock: assessing the social impact and conditions for success of the Royal Opera House in Thurrock”, September 2011
- Eden Project Communities, “The Cost of Disconnected Communities”, January 2017
- Frances Donaldson, *The Royal Opera in the twentieth century*, (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, c1988)
- Gene Cohen et al., “The impact of professionally conducted cultural programs on the physical health, mental health, and social functioning of older adult” *The Gerontologist* 46 (6), 2006
- George Monbiot, “The town that’s found a potent cure for illness – community”, *The Guardian*, 21 February 2018
- Harold Rosenthal, *Opera at Covent Garden: A Short History*, (London: Gollancz, 1967)
- Holt-Lunstad et al., “Loneliness and Social Isolation as Risk Factors for Mortality: a Meta-Analytic Review”, *Association for Psychological Science*, (2015)
- Jo Cox Loneliness, “A call to action”, December 2017
- John Bingham, “Britain the loneliness capital of Europe”, *The Telegraph*, 18 June 2014
- John Geller et al, “Loneliness as a predictor of hospital emergency department use”, *The Journal of Family Practice* 48 (10), 1999
- Katsuhisa Sakano et al, “Possible benefits of singing to the mental and physical condition of the elderly”, *BioPsychoSocial Medicine* 8, 2014

- Lizzy Davies, “It’s one big cesspit here: Thurrock, the country’s capital of misery”, *The Guardian*, 25 July 2012
- Michael Marmot, Fair Society, Healthy Lives, the Marmot Review (London: The Marmot Review, 2010)
- Nick Steward and Adam Lonsdale, “It’s better together: the psychological benefits of singing in a choir”, March 2016
- Official Labour Market Statistics website, “Labour Market Profile – Thurrock”
- Prime Ministers Office, “PM commits to government-wide drive to tackle loneliness” press release, 17 January 2018
- Public Health England, “Commissioning Cost-Effective Services for Promotion of Mental Health and Wellbeing and Prevention of Mental Ill-Health”, August 2017
- Royal Opera House Collections Online, “The History of the Royal Opera House”
- Royal Opera House website, “History”
- Royal Opera House website, “Royal Opera House Bridge”
- Royal Opera House website, “Thurrock”,
- Survey of London: Volume 35, *The theatre Royal, Drury Lane, and the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden* (London: London County Council, 1970)
- The King’s Fund, “What is social prescribing?”, February 2017,
- The New Economics Foundation and the Co-Op, “The Cost of Loneliness to UK Employers”, February 2017
- The Royal Opera House website, “The Annual Report, 2015/16”
- Thurrock government website, “Thurrock facts and statistics”
- Thurrock Trailblazer, “2015/16 Evaluation Report”, online
- Together Productions website, “Projects: Royal Opera House”
- UK Local Area website, Grays Thurrock Deprivation Index