ONE TOWN ONE VOICE

Voices United: Singing for Literacy and Connection

A resource for One Town One Voice singing groups to support inclusive literacy practices.

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Our Story

The One Town One Voice community singing initiative is a Nationwide solidarity- through- song movement which focuses on bringing people together in communities across Ireland, including those who have moved from other countries. It was established by Graham Clifford (founder of Sanctuary Runners) and began with the Fermoy International Choir in 2019. Since 2024, this project has been implemented by the Family Resource Centre National Forum. It focuses primarily on community integration and using communal singing in a positive, secular, non-political and inclusive way to help people get to know each other, work together and break down barriers.

Members of Fermoy International Choir at One Town One Voice Gathering 2025

How to Use This Resource:

This resource is designed to support music leads and group coordinators involved in local One Town One Voice singing groups. Whether you're just starting out or looking to deepen your group's impact, you'll find practical tips, inclusive literacy strategies, and song ideas that celebrate diversity and connection. Use it as a flexible guide - dip into the sections that suit your group's needs, adapt the suggestions to your local context, and feel confident that small, thoughtful changes can make a big difference. Above all, this resource encourages you to create a welcoming space where everyone feels valued, heard, and comfortable to participate - regardless of language, literacy level, or musical experience.

Members of Fermoy International Choir at One Town One Voice Gathering 2025

Project Background

The One Town One Voice initiative was born from a simple yet powerful idea: that singing together can break down barriers and build bridges between people of all backgrounds. In communities across Ireland, singing groups have become spaces where newcomers and long-time residents can connect, share stories, and celebrate diversity through music.

Thanks to funding from the Collaboration and Innovation fund from SOLAS, a pilot project took place in 2025 with two One Town One Voice singing groups which focused on group singing and literacy. This project recognises the unique role that singing can play in supporting literacy development. Singing is not just a musical activity - it's a literacy-rich experience. When participants sing together, they engage with rhythm, repetition, and vocabulary in ways that naturally support reading fluency and language acquisition. For those learning English, singing offers a low-pressure, joyful way to practice pronunciation and build confidence. For native speakers, it can enhance expressive language and listening skills. A key aim of this pilot project has been to improve the literacy outcomes of participants. There is numerous research which affirms that participating in singing and music is a powerful tool for literacy development across all ages. Singing lyrics helps with rhythm, cadence, and intonation, which are transferable skills in reading aloud. Moreover, the informal conversations that take place between group members will also benefit literacy and language learning for those taking part.

Importantly, the informal and social nature of singing groups creates opportunities for spontaneous conversation, peer learning, and cultural exchange. These interactions are especially valuable for people who may feel isolated or unsure about joining community activities. By embedding inclusive literacy practices into singing sessions, music leads can ensure that everyone - regardless of language or literacy level - feels welcome and able to participate.

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Tips for Inclusive Literacy Practices

Why Group Singing Supports Literacy:

- Repetition & rhythm in songs helps the ear to recognise sound patterns
- Builds Vocabulary – songs can introduce new words
- Improves reading fluency by tracking text in rhythm
- Social interaction – informal conversations with peers in the group
- Creative literacy – opportunities for collaborative lyric writing
- Cultural connection – opportunities to learn about songs from different cultures

Singing Groups & Digital Literacy:
There are many digital tools that are often used within singing groups:

- Google Translate – to understand lyrics or shared songs in different languages
- YouTube – discovering karaoke versions of songs, sharing song suggestions with one another
- Google Maps – to locate rehearsal space or performance locations
- WhatsApp – groups often use a group chat to share updates
- QR codes – scanning QR codes to register for events

Inclusive Literacy Practices:
(Tips adapted from a Fáilte Isteach workshop for One Town One Voice music leads, September 2025)

- Sound Before Text - Use sound before introducing text.
- Call and response - this is an inclusive way to learn lyrics as no reading is required.
- Break the song into manageable chunks. Ensure the whole group is feeling comfortable with a section before moving on to the part.
- When using lyric sheets, ensure the text is large and clear.
- Use exaggerated gestures and mouth shapes.
- When working with a multilingual group, be conscious of what may be confusing. Be mindful of your phrasing - eg 'Let's start from the beginning' rather than 'Let's take it from the top'.
- Use plain English and visual aids when needed.
- Be sensitive when choosing songs - avoid dense/complex lyrics.
- Have pens/pencils available to everyone for notetaking.
- Suggest that each group member writes phonics (from their own language) above any tricky words on their lyric sheets, to help them pronounce these.
- Use songs that have sections that use repeated syllables like "la la la, or "ooo/oh" etc. - this can help to build confidence for group members.

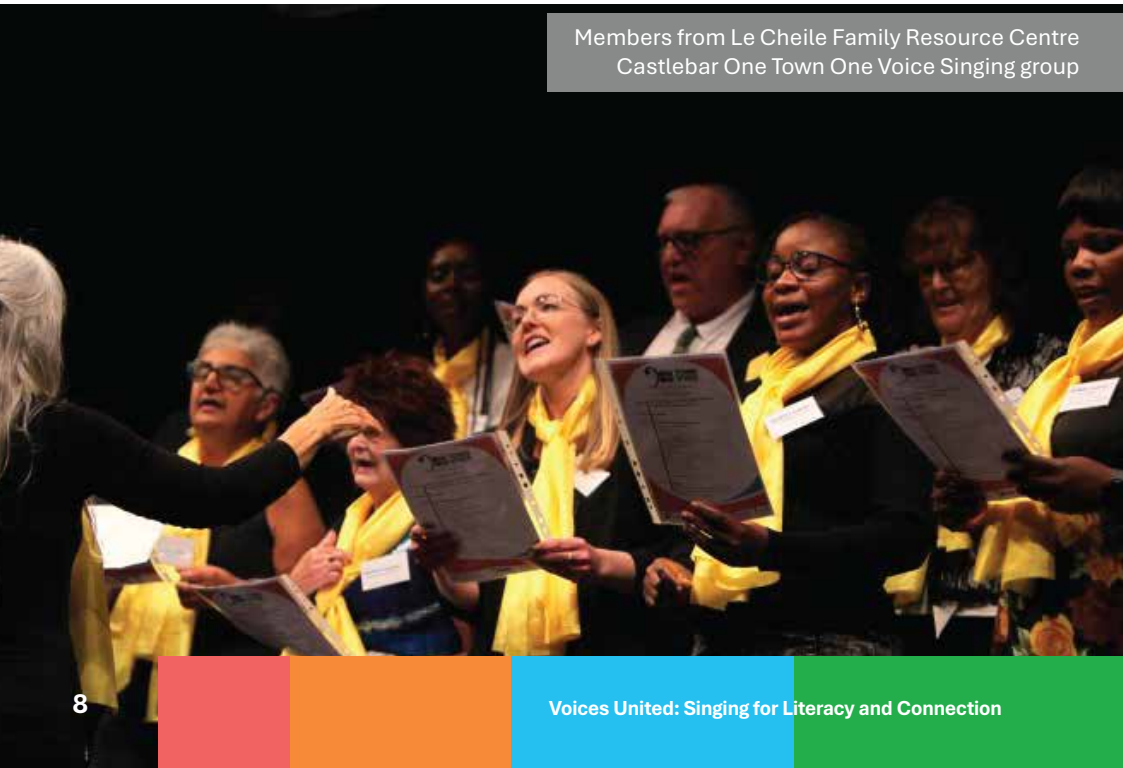
Challenges to be aware of:

- Limited English literacy – this may be the case for native English speakers also. Don't assume everyone is comfortable with reading text.
- Different language Scripts (e.g. Arabic, Cyrillic, Amharic)- Native speakers of these different languages made need extra support when learning English lyrics.

Create a Welcoming and Inclusive group

Recognising Barriers to Participation
Reflect on the following questions to ensure your group is inclusive:

- Is the meeting time convenient for those you hope to include?
- Is your space welcoming and accessible?
- Have you considered literacy or language barriers and how to support members who may struggle with reading lyrics?
- Do you have promotional posters in different languages?
- Are there public transport options or carpooling arrangements for those without transport?



Members from Le Cheile Family Resource Centre Castlebar One Town One Voice Singing group

Inclusive Practices for Group Sessions (gathered from current OTOV groups)

- Create a group agreement that highlights respect and inclusion.
- Gather song suggestions from group members.
- Include time for tea and chats during weekly sessions.
- Use ice-breakers and energizers to encourage mixing and interaction.
- Participation can look different for some people – some people may be comfortable to just listen at the beginning.
- Be sensitive when choosing songs – avoid lyrics with sensitive meanings.
- Check if any of your members would enjoy leading a song in their native language. If so, adding in the whole group for choruses makes for a very quick result, with the added benefit of giving the English-speaking members an idea of what it's like to have to try and pronounce words in a language other than their own.

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Songbook

This section shares some songs that we have found to be helpful to include for groups who have members who are currently learning English as an additional language.

1. Funga Alafia

An easy warm-up – singable after a couple of play-throughs:

This is a song in the Yoruba language from Nigeria, and, because it is a call and response-type song, it can be very easily learned and remembered. The Music lead (or even better, a group member who already knows the song and is confident about leading the song) starts by singing each phrase to the group and encouraging them to sing it back to him/her. Taking it line by line and slowly repeating tricky words will ensure your group knows this after no more than three sing-throughs. It is also an ideal song to sing if you have a performance coming up at short notice.

Lyrics:

Funga Alafia, ashe, ashe (sounds like 'ah shay')
Funga Alafia, ashe, ashe
Funga Alafia, ashe, ashe
Funga Alafia, ashe, ashe

Our hearts are pure.
Our voices true.
With open arms we welcome you.
Our hearts are full.
Our friendship true.
With peace and love we welcome you.

YouTube link: **https://youtu.be/PDjgSoMTKpU**

2. Oh-Ale-le

Another very simple warm-up:

This is a popular song that sounds like it may have come from an African country, but seemingly it was composed by Italian Boy Scout members during a summer camp. The lyrics are completely made up and meaningless, but catchy. This is another call and response song. Therefore, not having to memorize lots of words will make it a very easy song to learn, especially for those learning English in your group.

Lyrics:

(A call and response warm-up)

Call - Oh al-lay-lay
Response – Oh al-lay-lay
Call - Al-lay-lay zic-a-tung-a
Response - Al-lay-lay zic-a-tung-a
Call - A mas-sa mas-sa mas-sa
Response - A mas-sa mas-sa mas-sa
Call - Oh al-lay bal-lo al-la bal-lo-ay
Response - Oh al-lay bal-lo al-la bal-lo-ay

Each line is sung by either a soloist or one section and repeated by the whole group.

YouTube link: **https://youtu.be/ervb5BzDdm8**

3. Lean on Me by Bill Withers

Here's an easy first song to teach your group:

This song is a timeless anthem of unity, friendship, and mutual support. Its lyrics remind us that everyone needs help sometimes - and that offering a hand can strengthen the bonds between us. This message perfectly reflects the ethos of One Town One Voice: building community through solidarity and shared humanity. Singing this song together can create a powerful sense of belonging and reinforce the idea that we are stronger when we lean on each other.

Tip: The tempo is slow, giving everyone a chance to sing the lyrics, which aren't too wordy. As recommended by Fáilte Isteach, start with speaking the lyrics out loud and then introduce the lyrics by text.

YouTube link: **https://youtu.be/Nx_D0VTHBag**

Song Recommendations from ARD Family Resource Centre singing group

Hello, Goodbye by The Beatles (Lennon-McCartney)

Why the group selected this song?

'This was a fun song for our group to sing and really helpful for learning greetings'

Tip: You can change the language of the key words to include other languages in your group. For example, for a Spanish version, Hello = Hola, Goodbye = Adios. How many different languages can you include? It will be a fun way to encourage group members to share their languages with one another and learn together.

YouTube link: **https://youtu.be/vbh4MC_o-wU**

Singing in the Rain by Gene Kelly (Freed-Brown)

Why the group selected this song?
'This was a great song to learn vocabulary connected with the weather. Plus, the group had fun relating this song to living in the West of Ireland and embracing the rain here!'

YouTube link: **https://youtu.be/StB2WR4Hwdo**

Song Recommendations from Le Chéile Castlebar Family Resource Centre

Do Re Mi / Supercalifragilisticexpialidocious Medley

Do Re Mi from The Sound of Music

YouTube link: **https://youtu.be/Qy9cj-zwbVY**

Supercalifragilisticexpialidocious
from Mary Poppins

YouTube link: **https://youtu.be/uZNRzc3hWvE**

Why the group selected this song?
'We chose this medley because as a new group we were "starting at the very beginning". It was just a natural choice by the group to add the fun Mary Poppins song.' 'Do Re Mi' is a fun song for learning new vocabulary as there is plenty of repetition in it. 'Supercalifragilisticexpialidocious' is more challenging so as always, be sure to start with introducing sound before text. We guarantee some laughter in the group when learning this song!

Reflections & Feedback from participants

Participants from ARD Family Resource Centre One Town One Voice singing group

Through a post-project evaluation, participants engaged in this pilot expressed overwhelmingly positive experiences with the One Town One Voice Group Singing and Literacy Project. All respondents strongly agreed that they enjoyed the singing sessions, felt welcome and included, and experienced increased confidence in speaking English. They also reported learning new English words and phrases and making new friends. The group members also experienced an increase in digital literacy - through the use of Whatsapp group chat and YouTube for searching for songs for example. The participants also expressed that they felt a stronger sense of belonging in their community through being involved in the singing group.

‘This group gave me a good mood, I learned new words and I learned world hits in English!’

‘I never spoke English, so for about six months I only interacted with my family and felt completely alone, as if I were in a vacuum… When I first heard the choir sing at the community center, I was simply captivated. It was only thanks to the choir that I began to speak English and, most importantly, understand and communicate with incredibly wonderful people!’

‘Best part of me since I joined the singing group is I feel at home, more I feel so happy and connected with everyone around. It has given me an opportunity to relive my old good days of togetherness.’

‘This was my first time singing. I had never sang before like this. This group gave me a good and positive feeling. Singing made me feel good.’

‘It is a good idea to join the choir when you are learning english. New vocabulary, pronunciation, communication practice – all at once. New friends, new experiences – a lot of benefits. I am infinitely grateful for this opportunity. If something doesn’t fit, change it!’

English is not my first language. I am here in Ireland over one year. When I saw a poster for the singing group, I said I will join this. In this group, it teaches me to know more English through singing. I learned greetings and feel more confident. My family tell me they are seeing improvements in my English.’

‘I came to Ireland last year. I love this centre and I learn everything in this group. I had the chance to speak with people from other countries.’

‘This is the best example of integration, a beautiful bond and space to be yourself. I just love this place, good bond, singing together even if you are off balance it still feels lovely.’

‘It is about connecting with other people. Making friends. For me, it gets me out of the house, somewhere I can go and just be myself. I enjoy learning about other countries. I feel valued.’

‘All of the class are my friends. At the start, I was feeling shy, but I have more confidence now.’

Useful Resources

Helpful contacts:

There are many organisations/initiatives around the country that are working to create inclusive and welcoming communities. It may be helpful to link in with each one that is within your local area and seek their assistance in reaching new community members.

1. Local Authority Integration Teams
Each county has a Local Authority Integration Team (LAIT). The goal of LAITs is to help people seeking international protection and refugees become independent, settle into their new communities, and participate in Irish life. They do this by connecting people to important services that can help them integrate into the community. Your local LAIT team can support you by promoting your OTOV group to new community members. You can find the contact information for your local LAIT through the link below:

https://www.localgov.ie/lait-contact-details

2. Family Resource Centres
Family Resource Centres (FRCs) are vital hubs within their local community. There are currently 126 Family Resource Centres throughout the country and additional FRCs are coming onboard in 2026. They can provide connections to diverse groups in the community and support promoting your OTOV group. You can find your closet FRC through the link below:

https://www.familyresource.ie/family-resource-centres-regions.php

3. Sanctuary Runners
The Sanctuary Runners movement was established by Graham Clifford, who is the founder of One Town One Voice. The aims and values of Sanctuary Runners are very much aligned with our mission. There are groups up and running throughout the country and you can find your closest one through the link below:

https://sanctuaryrunners.ie/groups/

4. Fáilte Isteach
Fáilte Isteach is an initiative which provide free conversational English classes to migrants in local communities across the country. It is volunteer-led. You can view the locations of Fáilte Isteach classes and the contact details of the coordinator for each location below:

https://www.thirdageireland.ie/failte-isteach/locations

5. NALA
The National Adult Literacy Agency (NALA) is an independent charity committed to making sure people with unmet literacy, numeracy and digital literacy needs can fully take part in society and have access to learning opportunities that meet their needs. They offer online training and free resources for learners and the community and voluntary sector.

https://www.nala.ie/

6. Sing Ireland
Sing Ireland is a national organisation that supports all types of group singing in Ireland. Their website has helpful resources for singing groups.

https://singireland.ie/

7. Supports for One Town One Voice groups
Various resources have been developed to support One Town One Voice groups, including:

- Code of Conduct – One Town One Voice aims, belief and code of conduct for members
- Toolkit for One Town One Voice groups – a step-by-step guide for establishing a new group.
- Expansive Song Repertoire curated for groups by Lisa Dunphy, National Musical Advisor for One Town One Voice.

Please contact **otov@familyresource.ie** for more information

https://onetownonevoice.ie/

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ARD Family Resource Centre Digital Skills Tutor: Geraldine Delaney
Le Chéile Family Resource Centre Music Lead: Marcella Bourke
Le Chéile Family Resource Centre Group Coordinator: Lorraine Cusack
Fáilte Isteach Training Session facilitated by Claire Dalton
One Town One Voice National Musical Advisor: Lisa Dunphy

For more information about One Town One Voice, please contact

otov@familyresource.ie

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