

Remarks from Dermot O’Callaghan, CEO of Sing Ireland

‘It is so wonderful to see so many people with us today. It is evident that there is a huge interest and energy from the sector to see how, when and whether choirs and singing groups should get together to sing again and also if they are doing so how to make it as safe as possible to do it.

Some brief statistics, we had over 800 people register for this meeting, with nearly 600 already online now. That sees representation from 31 counties of Ireland. Sing Ireland is an all of Island organisation. Much of what we will discuss today revolves around the guidelines as issued by Government in the Republic of Ireland, the Public Health Agency in Northern Ireland has not, as yet, issued specific guidelines for singing groups but we are monitoring this on an ongoing basis. There will be much cross over however, of course, on best practice when and if rehearsals can resume.

We also have representatives from England, Germany, Scotland, Wales and the USA.

We have a very broad spectrum of participants here this evening from a diverse range of backgrounds, type of singing group and industries.

Acapella

Accompanists

Barbershop choruses

Barbershop groups

Care targeted groups ie medical conditions

Chamber choirs

Choral Societies

Church Choirs

Community singing groups

Female voice choirs

Choral festivals

Gospel choirs

Mixed language choirs

Male voice choirs

Music education (non formal) / primary and secondary (formal)

Music schools

Orchestras

Singing teachers

Professional choral singers
Theatre/Musical theatre schools
University groups
Workplace choirs
Youth choirs

Sing Ireland is very aware and mindful of the fact that the livelihoods of conductors/accompanists and musicians are so intertwined with the ability to be able to rehearse and get the sector back to group singing. We also know that singers in groups really miss their interactions at choir and singing each week. We know that there is significant impact on people's mental and physical health, as well as to their well-being, by not being able to sing together.

With all of that said, I would like to make a general comment on the situation at the moment. We, at Sing Ireland, as you can imagine hear from singers in every context and with an enormous number of differing opinions/questions on the safety of returning to face to face singing. There are some who will not and would not like to sing in a group at the moment at all and then there are others who cannot understand why they are not back to their singing group rehearsals and so on. At Sing Ireland, we are sympathetic to both views (and all of the many views in between) but we have said, that we cannot advise that it is entirely safe to sing. We can stand over that, because the data available worldwide is incomplete and even with risk assessments and risk mitigation strategies, there is no way to ensure that it is 100 percent safe to return to rehearsals. On the other hand, in the Irish context it is worth saying that our reproduction (RO) number is low and that community transmission has been shown to be low and that new cases and deaths from Covid-19, have been decreasing. If things continue in this way then that obviously reduces the risk.

I am sure there are many people who are on this call this evening that would simply like to be told that 1. It is safe to sing and 2. You can do it safely from X date in the future. I'm sorry to say that nobody, worldwide, can tell you that based on the evidence and data to date and so it is a frustrating situation for everybody from that perspective.

In addition, as will be discussed in detail this evening there is incomplete data available around the spread of droplets and in particular of aerosols. Aerosols being the small particles that are emitted into the air, when we speak or sing. The data is incomplete in that it does not tell us the comparative difference in the spread of these aerosols when we speak versus when we sing and for instance, what differences there are in a group singing in a room or speaking in a room. What are the differences between a choir or singing group's

rehearsals and a gathering in a restaurant, at a family occasion, a funeral, a wedding, a party etc.

There are a lot of international studies being undertaken at present and in particular there is a large international study on aerosols, and other matters, being undertaken at the moment out of Colorado State University. This study expects to give preliminary results for choirs and singing groups on the 25th of this month.

However, I would also like to say that data gathering and evidence takes time to build up to a body of research that will give people real indications about relative safety and so we at Sing Ireland have to err on the side of caution.

Importantly, I do want to say, as I've said this many times, it is not singing that is dangerous but the virus is dangerous. The more we know about the virus and droplets/aerosols and how they spread, the more we can advise on ways to reduce risk. There will be discussions on ventilation/rehearsal space issues and so on. Knowledge is power here. We don't need to be gloomy about the prospects. The more we know, the more we can recommend actions to reduce risk and make things as safe as possible. Sing Ireland has seen the inspiring resilience and adaptability of the group singing sector since the beginning of the emergence of Covid-19 in Ireland. We know that this perseverance and adaptability will be required again in the coming months and that singing groups in Ireland will undoubtedly rise to the particular challenges that this virus presents to the world singing community.