Sing to welcome a new dawn
how to run a Dawn Chorus

Age & Opportunity
Bealtaine Festival
Celebrating the arts and creativity as we age

Life is for Living.

The Arts Council participation in the Cultural Programme to mark Ireland’s Presidency of the Council of the European Union is supported by the Department of Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht / Tá rannpháirtíocht na Comhairle Ealaíon sa Chlár Cultúrtha chun comóradh a dhéanamh ar Uachtaránacht na hÉireann ar Chomhairle an Aontais Eorpaigh á tacú ag an Roíne Ealaíon, Oidhreachta agus Gaeltachta.
Sing to welcome a new dawn

how to run a Dawn Chorus

It’s dawn on the first Sunday in May. The sun is just starting to rise. The air is sparkling. The birds are singing beautifully. Do I hear another melody in the air?

Yes!, It’s people singing. Older people, their families and friends. Songs they love, songs that anyone can join in!

Dawn Chorus is a choral project where older people and choirs learn songs together and sing them at dawn on the first Sunday in May. It’s part of the Bealtaine Festival.

Organising or joining in a Dawn Chorus is easy to do and is guaranteed to make everyone feel great, wherever they live, whatever the weather. You, too, can be part of it! This guide tells you how.

Dawn Chorus started in 2009 in Ireland. It is one of the core events of the Bealtaine Festival, Ireland’s national festival celebrating creativity as we age, which lasts for the month of May.
Dawn Chorus in Carlow during Bealtaine 2010
photo: Jeff Harvey

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What is the point of Dawn Chorus?

Singing is uplifting and makes people feel good, especially when they sing together. Dawn Chorus encourages people to join together to sing. It encourages people to try something a bit different. Dawn Chorus puts older people at the heart of a feel-good community-based activity that actually makes people feel better and become healthier! Research proves it! A study done by Age UK in 2017, of the index of wellbeing in later life, found that engagement in creative & cultural activities makes the highest contribution to one’s overall wellbeing. (Age UK, 2017).

Why get creative as you get older?

Collective arts activities can bring communities together. Dawn Chorus can involve different groups who wouldn’t otherwise mix, can break down barriers between different age groups and can promote deeper levels of understanding between people. If you want to make your community – or the world – a better place, sing with your neighbours!

It is good for us!

• Research shows that taking part in arts activities leads to older people enjoying better physical health and higher self-esteem, being less lonely and becoming more active.
• Arts activities build resilience due to a sense of achievement and control, and because of the social ties that people develop through being involved.
• One study even found that socially supportive music activities stimulate people’s cognitive abilities. So now you know why starting a Dawn Chorus is a clever idea!

Who can get involved in a Dawn Chorus?

Anyone can organise or get involved in a Dawn Chorus. Even you!: older people’s groups, choirs, community groups, work colleagues, faith-based groups . . . anyone. Don’t just rely on organised groups. Talk to everyone you know, and get them to speak to everyone they know. Use facebook and twitter to publicise your event! Put up posters and notices, in shops, community centres, public libraries, places of worship, cinemas . . . Contact your local radio station, newspaper, community newsletter . . . Be creative!
Bealtaine (pronounced BEE-owl-tin-ah) is the Irish-language word for May. Now 23 years old, it is the largest collaborative arts festival in the country, involving over 96,000 participants and over 500 organisations. It is a festival that ushered in the summer. It encourages older artists (or soon-to-be artists) to create something new, to look again, to try again, to enjoy anew . . . Bealtaine has created new work that has travelled the world, it has brought dance and theatre companies on their first visit to Ireland, it has showcased the new work of Ireland’s older established artists and, more importantly, it has enabled older people throughout Ireland to get creative and have fun! www.bealtaine.ie

Bealtaine is an initiative of Age & Opportunity, a national not-for-profit organisation that promotes greater participation by older people.

Where can we run a Dawn Chorus?

The best place to run a Dawn Chorus is outdoors, in an inspiring or picturesque scenic location, perhaps near water – a lake, a pond, a river, the sea. We suggest that there is shelter nearby – a hotel, a café, a bandstand!

What is Bealtaine?

What happens in a Dawn Chorus?

Whatever you decide – so long as it involves older people, and people singing together. Dawn Chorus is not a professional concert, or an event to entertain older people. It is about celebration, being part of something, joining in, just for the joy of it. There is no need for an audience. Invite who you like – but get them to join in!

Some of the people who are involved in Dawn Chorus in Ireland tell their stories in this guide. You will see that all Dawn Chorus events are different.

- Coming together is simple, just a group of people singing together, having refreshments afterwards and going home.
- Be Creative and include some poetry? Or yodelling?
- Plan - have at least three rehearsals
- Build your Dawn Chorus into a community-wide event
- Ask your local hotel, café or community centre to supply refreshments
- Invite neighbouring towns to take part and have a sing off!
What do you need to think about when planning a Dawn Chorus?

Dawn Chorus is a do-it-yourself event. You are in control and you can make up your own way of having a Dawn Chorus. There are no rules, but we do ask:

› Make sure that older people are central to the planning and the Dawn Chorus event itself.
› Host your chorus at dawn or soon afterwards, if that makes you happier.
› Pick a scenic place in your locality, preferably near water.
› Transport – how will people travel to and from your event.
› Choose songs that everyone – or most participants, at least – are likely to know, with simple or catchy tunes. It is helpful to provide everyone with a copy of the words of the songs on the day.
› Your Dawn Chorus event can be as long as you like, most events are 20 mins long.
› Plan a definite beginning, middle and end to your Dawn Chorus.
› Welcome everyone at the start.
› Acknowledge Bealtaine Festival and Age & Opportunity.

What are the challenges of organising a Dawn Chorus?

The worst thing that can happen is that nobody arrives on the morning. You can make sure that people are coming by phoning them, offering transport, offering refreshments or breakfast after your event.

› Sometimes less people come if the weather is bad. Having shelter nearby reduces that risk. If the weather is really terrible you could reschedule the event.
› Sometimes people stop coming to rehearsals or other meetings because they are not enjoying them. Dawn Chorus is not a professional performance! Make sure that every bit of Dawn Chorus is fun. Don’t have too many rehearsals or complicated arrangements. Three rehearsals are probably enough. Choose songs that people know and like, that suit them, and that are inspiring or uplifting.
› Sometimes people worry about what will happen if there is an accident. You may want to check if the location you choose is covered by public liability insurance. Some Dawn Chorus groups arrange their own insurance.
How can we Register our Dawn Chorus?

To register your event, go to www.bealtaine.ie and follow the instructions.

How can we share our Dawn Chorus with other people and other countries?

Through Dawn Chorus you can share your talents with millions of other people, and they can admire yours! First, register with Bealtaine (see above).

Then:
Contact us via social media:
www.facebook.com/bealtaineFestival
@BealtaineFestival
www.twitter.com/bealtaineFest
@BealtaineFest
Join our facebook group:
www.facebook.com/BealtaineFestivalParticipants
or
Contact us via the office:
Kim Chew, Arts & Culture Administrator
kim.chew@ageandopportunity.ie or tel: 01 805 7713
Karen Hennessy, Arts & Culture Coordinator
karen.hennessy@ageandopportunity.ie or tel: 01 853 5180
Testimonials from Dawn Chorus Organisers

Margaret Burke, Dunmore East, Southeast Ireland
We encouraged and blackmailed people to come to our Dawn Chorus! People here don’t like to get up early, so we started at 8am. We gave everyone printed wordsheets. We sing songs everyone knows. Last year one of them was “Sun Arise”. The sun was well up at that stage, but we sang it anyway! We had a guitarist and amplification. We sang beside a hotel which looks out over the sea. The tide was in and it was beautiful. We captured it on video and in photographs. Afterwards the hotel provided breakfast. There were about 20 of us.

It was such a great morning, great fun. The feel-good factor was great

One piece of advice for a first Dawn Chorus:
Allow plenty of time to organise it.

John O’Keeffe, Carlow town, Southeast Ireland
We called our Dawn Chorus “The River of Life" and held it on the banks of the river Barrow in Carlow town, Ireland. “We told people to come at 7.30am so that we could start by 8! It was all over by 9.30. We held several meetings prior to the event and had a clear plan for the day. We also had an MC that helped greatly to keep timings. This was a community based event including local children, a pipe band, african drumming, Irish dancing and even someone singing on a boat gliding up the river! There were between 150 and 200 people at our Dawn Chorus. Everyone was thrilled with it. Organising something like this was a new thing for our Active Retirement Association, and it was truly memorable.

One piece of advice for a first Dawn Chorus:
Invite people to help organise who inspire confidence in local groups.
Lana McNamara, Donegal town, North west Ireland
I love a sing-song! We picked a local hotel that looks out onto a lake, with swans and the mountains in the background. I thought, “we can go inside if it is wet” The hotel gave us hot drinks and scones and jam afterwards and told its guests about the event and encourages them to join in. There are seven choirs involved with each preparing two songs. Most of the songs show some appreciation of nature, or else are songs about Donegal – not too dreary but not the hip-hop thing!

Starting at 7am, people come from up to 40 miles away! We have about 150 people each time with such a happy atmosphere. We don’t generally have any solo singers – it’s not a concert. But last year a friend of mine came with his guitar, and he yodelled for nearly ten minutes, non-stop! He stole the show.

One piece of advice for a first Dawn Chorus:
The venue and the choice of songs are both very important. The first year we had a Dawn Chorus we hadn’t a clue, but I showed my enthusiasm and got out there and did it. You can, too!

Angela Cox, Ballina, Co Mayo West Ireland
We were in the pub one night after choir practice, and one of the choir members started talking about Dawn Chorus. They said, “If I ring you tomorrow when you are sober, will you do it?” That is how we started.

We decided we would do it properly. We sing at 5am on the bridge over the river in Ballina. We don’t plan much. We do medleys, songs from here and there, songs that the choir knows. We take flasks of hot drinks, and we have a bit of craic [fun]. There are a few fishermen around – either we frighten them away, or we are an inspiration! There are about 30-40 older people at the Dawn Chorus, at least one is over 80, singing away. Afterwards we go to someone’s house for a potluck breakfast – everybody brings something. You get home at about 7 or 8 in the morning. Everyone feels so great after doing it.

One piece of advice for a first Dawn Chorus:
Do some advertising among older people.
Joan Dowling, Avoca, Co Wicklow
There’s a beautiful river that flows through our village, and we sing there at 7am. A committee organises Dawn Chorus and chooses the songs. Last year was the best so far, because we got a great deal for breakfast from the local hotel. There were about 20 of us, and a lovely atmosphere. Whether you are 10 people or 2000, you get the same feeling.

Dawn Chorus is special because people all over Ireland are doing the same thing for the same reason, and we are part of it. It’s uplifting stuff; 7am is a lovely time to meet up. Dawn Chorus is really worthwhile.

One piece of advice for a first Dawn Chorus: Try it, do it, you’ll love it!

Gavin Barr, Waterford City
Over 30 people sing on the waterfront in Waterford City at 7am, for about half an hour. It’s a really special occasion. Then we go to a nearby hotel for hot drinks. It’s a great way to end the Dawn Chorus.

The Dawn Chorus involves a local Active Retirement group and a boys’ school choir. The women in the Active Retirement group, they don’t usually sing, none of them are in choirs. The school choir is well-known locally, it’s really good. Brother Ben, who conducts the choir, runs the rehearsals. He’s a very comical man, always joking, so the rehearsals are very entertaining. He mixes up the older people and the students when they sing, so that an older person is standing beside a student.

Brother Ben also chooses the songs, and makes sure they are inter-generational. There are Beatles songs, like “Ticket to Ride”, “Hey Jude” and “Yesterday”. He also puts in Snow Patrol and Oasis songs, but slower ones.

One piece of advice for a first Dawn Chorus: Do loads of publicity! And make it special.
Convinced?

We hope so!

Sing in a Dawn Chorus at dawn on the first Sunday in May and join people all over Europe, and beyond, in a unique, uplifting and special free event.

What is Age & Opportunity?

Bealtaine is Ireland’s national festival which uniquely celebrates the arts and creativity as we age. The festival is run by Age & Opportunity, the national organisation that promotes active and engaged living as we get older. Age & Opportunity’s mission is to inspire and empower older people to live healthy and fulfilling lives.

www.bealtaine.ie