

Report on Pilot Rural Touring Show

Reepham & Cherry Willingham Village Hall, 25th
September 2020.



Introduction

Live & Local supported a professional rural touring show on Friday 25th September 2020 in partnership with Townsend Theatre Productions and Reepham & Cherry Willingham Village Hall Committee, Lincolnshire.

This performance of 'The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists' was the first professional performance in a UK village hall since the beginning of the pandemic and was informed by the then current guidance and legislation relating to the performing arts, community venues and catering. Socially distanced seating allowed for 37 audience members at a venue that usually seats 90.

Aims & Objectives

The aim was to inform Live & Local in order to help us advise, provide assurance, and instil confidence for promoters and their volunteers, audiences, companies. The objectives were to:

1. Test the viability that under the then COVID-Secure measures that rural touring can safely recommence while adhering to relevant legislation and guidance.
2. Test conclusions from our audience restART survey carried out in May.
3. Observe and learn from the experience of the audience, promoter and company at the event and pre- and post- event.
4. Use the results of these measures to inform the arts sector, rural touring organisations and local authority funders.

Context

This performance was carried out on September 25th, 2020 in Lincolnshire.

The regulations were changing regularly in the four-week run in to this event and regulations may well be different at the time of reading this report and/or due to geographical location. At the outset and throughout we reminded all partners that whilst this was called a 'pilot' the risks were very real.

The local voluntary promoter group were an experienced group having had five Live & Local events in the past two years. Their previous events were music, so this theatre show was a change for their audience.

The event was informed by Live & Local's audience and promoter restART surveys carried out during the preceding summer lockdown.

The pilot was supported by funds from Arts Council England, Lincolnshire County Council, West Lindsey District Council, and the National Rural Touring Forum (NRTF).

Approach

Risk Mitigations

Planning for the event considered relevant guidance and legislation which changed multiple times during the planning process. The following measures were used:

- Comprehensive risk assessments by Company and promoter/Venue
- Advance customer communications
- Digital marketing
- Advance sales only online ticketing
- Advance sales only online drinks pre-ordering
- Enhanced cleaning
- Entrance and wall signage
- Additional staffing
- Test and Trace
- Socially distanced queuing
- Socially distant seating
- Seat labelling
- Hand sanitiser
- One-way system
- Face coverings
- Increased ventilation
- Table service

Risk Assessments

A risk assessment for their show was required from the company by Live & Local in advance of even being booked for this event. The venue was required by regulation to have completed a risk assessment to be able to open the venue for any event.

An additional risk assessment was produced in cooperation with Live & Local, the company and promoter for this specific event incorporating the show and venue assessments and enhanced in line with the needs of a professional ticketed performance.

Seating Format

The venue, being a village hall with no fixed seating, benefited from flexible seating opportunities. However, managing the seating plan in line with socially distanced seating was time-consuming. Capacity depended on the size of groups booking which could not be easily predicted and had to be managed in an ongoing way by adapting the initial seating plan. This stood out in contrast to the usually informal unreserved seating arrangements at Live & Local rural touring events.

Audience Communication – before and during pilot

COVID-Secure information was kept concise in the marketing to reassure but not overwhelm, focussing on areas highlighted by our previous audience research. At the point of booking and in a reminder email the day before the show, the audience were informed of a range of measures in place and what was needed from them in order to deliver a safe event.

Staff and volunteers verbally repeated key messages around social distancing, the one-way systems, face coverings and timings at the entrance. This clear 'one to one' guidance was welcomed by the audience.

Due to the relatively small number involved, this was manageable and worked well. Staggered entry times were not required due to the audience size and that it was only advance sales.

Cleaning

Enhanced cleaning procedures were introduced at the venue, with staff/volunteers provided additional equipment and materials before and after the event.

Enhanced Staffing and Support

As this was a pilot event two staff from Live & local were involved on the day in addition to the usual three volunteers who run events at this venue. A significant amount of extra time was committed in advance and on the day by the promoter, company, and Live & Local staff.

It was possible for this promoter to engage enough volunteer support to safely deliver a show, however duties needed to be very clearly assigned along with appropriate instruction.

For this pilot there was a substantial additional time investment from the Live & Local professional team and from the promoter. Although this was a pilot event run by Live & Local in conjunction with an experienced local promoter and company at a time when the regulations were still new and changing, this still indicated to us that we would have to augment our support for all other promoters who elect to take shows in the foreseeable future.

Ventilation

Ventilation was increased by opening internal and some external doors, however in late September this proved inhospitable. We could not have as much additional ventilation as planned due to very high winds on the day. We had considered using an outdoor space covered by brought in gazebos for the audience pre-show and interval, but this was not possible due to the weather. Increasing ventilation in this manner has to be balanced by the comfort of the audience as well as creating additional risks.

Face Coverings

The regulations at the time required everyone in the venue to wear face coverings, unless eating or drinks (or exempt). The audience wore face coverings throughout the performance and when moving around the building, only taking them off to eat or drink. These regulations had changed from being only guidelines very recently before the pilot date. As a result, this was not the norm and had to be regularly emphasised to most of the participants in the pilot, both audience and volunteers.

Artist/Company Mitigations

The company were a professional organisation with experience of touring to non-theatre spaces and had also been required to provide a show specific COVID-Secure risk assessment prior to being booked.

Extra performance space was required to distance the performer from the audience. Artists wore face coverings while in the hall except for during the performance. The get-in time was increased, and the artists were allowed sole access to the main hall in advance of the show. No practical support (carrying gear) was given to the artists for the get in or get out. However, this was difficult to manage on the day with other practical matters needing to be mutually agreed.

Promoters will need to allow extra time to ensure the setting up of the front of house and bar to allow artists sole access to the space. All participants on the day found it a substantial change to maintain social distancing given the usually highly mutually supportive interactions between artists and local volunteers. The experience indicated to us that we would have to add to our assurances to artists that all the local volunteers were fully appraised of the relevant risks and mitigations, not just the main contacts with whom they may have had frequent contact in the run up to the day.

Catering

The audience pre-ordered and pre-paid for drinks online. These were priced separately to tickets and then prepared in advance and delivered by table service. There was no opportunity to buy any further drinks during the evening, resolving issues around people queueing at the bar or needing to pay in cash (as many community venues cannot currently facilitate contactless payment). This event used online ticketing to facilitate this process (Ticket Source) and there was no cost to the promoter.

To test the viability of a catering offer as this is so much part of many rural touring events, complimentary food was provided by local professional catering company, Salted Orange. This was prepared nearby in a van and delivered to the audience by table service. They were the regular professional suppliers for the hall, so it made sense to continue the relationship. Catering can be safely provided by experienced volunteers in a village hall should they chose to do so themselves, if have brought themselves thoroughly up to speed with COVID-Secure catering regulations.

Seating and Ticketing

Seating was planned using Ticket Source and people were seated theatre-style in household groups/support bubbles only. Establishing the amount of usable space in a community venue is not as straightforward as in a professional venue. Community venues usually benefit from flexible seating and offer a good solution for socially distanced seating. However, seating arrangements in these venues have often been relatively informal in the past and the required higher level of attention to detail needed to seating for everyone involved (audience, staff, volunteers, company) is a significant change to what many involved in rural touring are used to.

They will often need enhanced support from Live & Local to maximise seating whilst retaining a COVID-Secure event. This will be variously challenging in the future dependent on whether the promoter is IT resistant or not (to using online ticketing) and or whether they can create and manage a more manual seating planning system. Managing a seating plan dependent on the sizes of household groups and the order they book in, while trying to maximise the space available, is time intensive. This pilot used Ticket Source, however their socially distanced seating planning function did not at that time avoid orphan seats however managed the situation well in all other respects.

Marketing and Communications

Marketing was carried out digitally and by word of mouth. The show was advertised on social media, circulated via mailing list and by invitations from the promoter and committee to contacts in the community. Print is usually an important part of marketing a Live & Local rural touring show, however none was used for the pilot in order to mitigate risks to promoters and volunteers distributing leaflets and posters in the community. Given the smaller number of tickets available, it seems quite possible that print is either unnecessary or only needed in small quantities.

Financial

Tickets were sold rather than complimentary so as to test the sales and box office processes. They were set at a reduced price of £5 to reflect the one-off nature of this pilot event. Audience comments suggest that there is no reason to reduce tickets for future standard events.

Socially distanced seating and increased performance space meant the capacity of the hall was reduced from 90 to 37. Even if tickets had been priced at our usual £10-£12, this would mean a 38% decrease in our average total ticket yield. Capacity and therefore total ticket yield is strongly influenced by the size of household groups booking, so shows attracting several larger groups would fare better financially, however based on our previous booking data we can surmise that the balance of group sizes at this pilot is very much within the normal pattern.

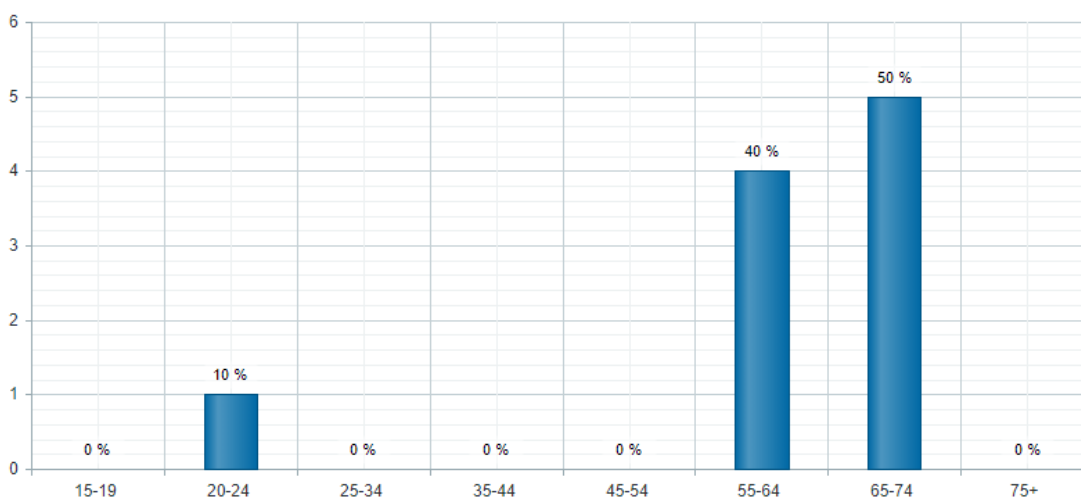
Rural touring events are usually subsidised to some extent. Assuming Live & Local's usual financial model, reducing the total ticket yield by 38% would require a 31% increase in the subsidy to cover just the direct costs (i.e. this does not include additional staff time) Furthermore any income retained by the local promoter would be substantially reduced, potentially putting another barrier in place for some (but not all) promoters to book shows.

Audience Analysis

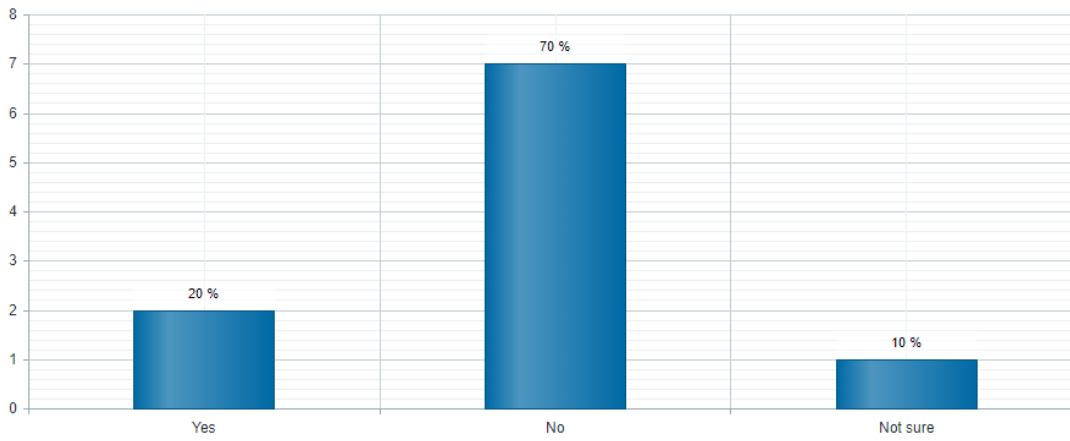
Live & Local used a bespoke survey for feedback sent the day after the show. We received completed survey forms from 10 of 13 bookers. All responders reported feeling safe and comfortable throughout the show. The vast majority of responders were aware of safety measures before attending the show and found the online pre-ordering systems for tickets and drinks easy to use. The results reflect an overwhelmingly positive experience and audience buy-in to COVID-Secure measures in order to make it possible for shows to recommence.

Email Survey Results

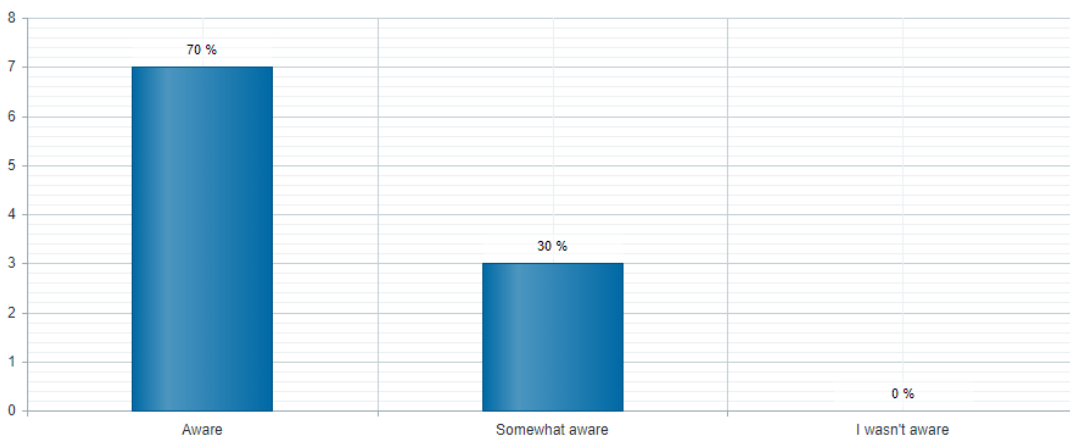
Age of Responders



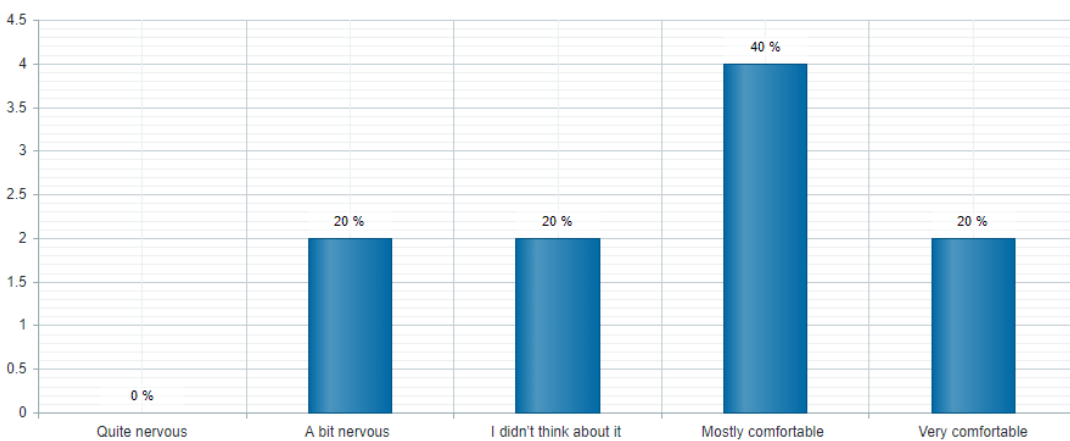
COVID-19 Vulnerability



Awareness of Safety Measures Pre-booking



Feelings about attendance before arrival



Feelings about attendance after arrival



Conclusions

The pilot demonstrated that rural touring performances can safely resume with increased advance guidance given to promoters and companies by Live & Local along with additional resources at the event, in terms of time, people and skills. The measures used were effective and the benefits to the audience far outweighed the inconvenience of socially distanced seating, wearing face coverings and the other COVID-Secure mitigations.

Live & Local has a responsibility to all participants in its rural touring events; artists, attenders, and volunteers, and to its own reputation to ensure COVID-Secure events. As there may be a natural inclination from local Promoters to interpret regulations in a way so as to minimise change for their regular attenders, Live & Local and the company's professional role must be to encourage and support the delivery of legal and COVID-Secure events.

The pilot has shown that with this higher level of professional support, rural touring shows incorporating socially distanced seating and other COVID-Secure mitigations can be safely delivered and be very well-received by the audience. However, many promoters are likely to need additional support in order to maximise their seating capacity and provide catering and other safe event management protocols.

To ensure a safe event, promoters will also need more volunteer support than usual who are well briefed and there will need to be an increased level of advanced communication and collaboration with regards to risk assessments and discussion about Health & Safety Practices.

The partnership between professional and voluntary organisations and the combination of earned and public funds, is a highly cost-effective market intervention that ensures a high-quality cultural offer in rural communities and one that delivers more community benefits than only audiences. These additional benefits are clearly even more vital now in order to support the recovery from COVID in these rural communities. Whilst in the longer-term the financial model imposed by socially distanced seating is unsustainable, in the meantime additional funds within the model or agreed reduced outputs in terms or numbers of events will be necessary.

For all the participants it was more complex and time consuming than our 'standard' rural touring events and had a substantial learning curve within a constantly shifting set of regulations. This will be the case going forward, albeit with a diminishing burden.

However, it was also a hugely encouraging and inspiring experience to see that live performance can happen and there is a demand for it during the crisis and also for it to help the recovery.

Appendices

Live & Local Staff Team

Sophie Kirk – Community Engagement Officer

Selena Hackett – Technical Support Officer

John Laidlaw – Executive Director

Live & Local's Takeaways

These are recommendations and actions coming out of our experience in delivering this particular pilot performance, which Live & Local will be taking forward. Not all will necessarily be relevant across the wider rural touring sector nor will they all necessarily be implemented at every Live & Local performance. In some cases, these points may be or will become mandatory but are worth including here to present a comprehensive picture of COVID-Secure rural touring with Live & Local.

- Assess each performance when confirmed with regard to the level of support needed by the promoter and/or the company.
- Pre-Menu inclusion COVID specific risk assessments from the companies for their show.
- Venue risk assessment prior to opening building from the local promoter.
- Risk assessment for the event produced collaboratively between promoter and company.
- Schedule for the day produced collaboratively and agreed.
- Pre-show Health & Safety discussion on zoom or alternative between promoter and company (with the schedule and RA to hand).
- Live & Local attend all shows for foreseeable future.
- Increased volunteer support on the day.
- The local promoters clearly assign duties and provide training for their volunteers
- Verbal reminder of key COVID-Secure instructions to everyone at entrance.
- In advance ticket sales only (No door sales)
- Keep food and drink offers simple to limit audience queries, changes, and cancellations.
- In advance drinks ordering
- Recommend online ticketing as the solution for ticket sales and catering
- Recommend using Ticket Source if they use online ticketing.
- Advance COVID-Secure information to audience in advertising, at point of booking and as a reminder(s) in advance of the show.
- Socially distanced seating strictly maintained and assertively reminded where necessary
- Audience seated in household/support bubble groups only. (This was not a required part of regulations at the time, but we choose to follow this path for clarity and enhanced safety)
- Use outdoor space for pre-show and interval, if possible and sensible.
- Label seats & usher audience to their seats to ensure social distancing.
- Increase ventilation by keeping internal/external doors and windows open.
- One-way system in venue.
- Table service for drinks/food.
- Face coverings to be worn inside venue (unless exempt or while eating/drinking).
- Entrance/Exit and wall signage.
- Enhanced cleaning.
- Provide hand sanitizer at entrance.
- Consider two performances in a day (allowing for adequate time in between performances to make the space COVID-Secure again)

Photos



Townsend Theatre Productions



Seating socially distanced.



Audience arrival and verbal reminder of COVID Safe measures.



The audience wore face coverings throughout the performance.



Assigned seats for each household/support bubble group.



Promoter Gary Cheshire outlines the evening and introduces the show.