

Libraries and Rural Touring Arts Project

Project Intro

Libraries and Rural Touring Arts – maximising the potential of our nation's libraries.

National Rural Touring Forum to support touring in libraries in a new national project funded by Arts Council England,

Project Summary

Funded by the Arts Council England, the National Rural Touring Forum (NRTF) present a new national 'Libraries and Rural Touring Arts' Project which looks to explore the challenges and potential of our nation's libraries to expand their service offer and diversify audiences through a programme of touring arts.

Overview

With 3,600 libraries open in the UK, a task force of more than 50,000 volunteers providing a range of services, and a staggering 60% of the population now holding a current library card, it's maybe not surprising to hear that in 2015 visitor numbers to public libraries in England reached 225 million. (www.gov.uk)

In light of this, we live in a time where digital technology is developing rapidly and continues to have a major impact on the way we obtain information, culture and the written word. Libraries are having to re-think how their library spaces are used and what they will look like in the future.

Nick Poole, chief executive of librarian body CILIP believes that ***'by investing in libraries, you create opportunities for education and skills across the country, which in turn creates the conditions for future economic growth.'***

Despite the ongoing challenges the Library sector has faced over the last 10 years, the reduced government spending, library closures, subsequent job losses and a steady decline in visitor numbers, the local library continues to be valued as a trusted, safe, democratic space offering valuable resources, expertise and support that ensure no-one in our communities is excluded or left behind.

Libraries remain integral to the communities they serve; they have become an important part of society and essential in delivering services that contribute to improving the lives of individuals and communities.

Well known campaigner and supporter of the library, author Chris Riddell, believes libraries to be ***“cultural hubs that, if nurtured by government, have the ability to transform lives.”***

Through a series of Arts Council funded projects there is now a growing body of evidence that a diverse creative arts and culture programme enables libraries to effectively engage existing, hard to reach and new audiences. These arts-based activities have shown to contribute to key agendas including health and wellbeing, cultural and creative enrichment, increased reading and literacy, health and wellbeing, personal development, a vibrant economy and community cohesion.

The Devon based ‘Reading Well Books on Prescription’ scheme concluded that ***‘Libraries can be the focus point for a community, supporting cultural regeneration by driving footfall, reinvigorating local spirit and helping to change people’s perceptions about places.’***

The Project

In response the NRTF Libraries Project, funded by the Arts Council England will support the delivery of rural touring arts in libraries by recognising and promoting the high-quality creative activities already happening in rural libraries across the UK, strengthening and boosting ambition by sharing resources, contacts, expertise and knowledge, funding opportunities to map, review, learn, expand and develop the touring potential of libraries and bring organisations and professionals together to network, support, educate and collaborate on a national scale.

The project is also expanding beyond the UK by working with Welsh Arts Council’s Night Out Rural Touring Scheme to develop performances in rural and community libraries in Wales.

Holly Lombardo, NRTF Director believes ***“This is an important strategic project for NRTF. We look forward to identifying and responding to the needs of librarians who have the potential to programme work. It is also a great opportunity for artists and performing companies who will potentially have a new set of venues and touring spaces to show their work”***

In backing this new project James Urquhart, Senior Manager, Arts Council England said: ***“We are really pleased to be supporting the NRTF to deliver this important initiative which is open to libraries across the country. The programme will enable libraries to explore the programming potential of their spaces by offering a range of resources, networking and go and see opportunities. NRTF plays a key part in supporting the rural touring sector and, by sharing their expertise more widely, communities will be able to connect with arts and culture in their local library.”***

While the project will inevitably highlight the ongoing challenges and the future viability of arts programming in libraries, we hope it will provide further evidence to support how commissioning arts in libraries can bring other advantages. Outside of income streams that might be ways to engage new and hard to reach audiences, increase library membership and usage and expand services in the fields of health, wellbeing, digital platforms, and culture. It will present additional opportunities, creative challenges, and a new diverse audience to the creative sector. It will look at developing the potential for small, rural, and non-purpose-built arts venues and begin to establish the role of rural touring in delivering high-quality, professional work for these community spaces.

Michael Ellis MP – Minister for Arts, Heritage and Tourism in October 2018 highlighted the role of projects like this in their objectives for ***“working with local and central government to promote this sort of approach, to encourage them to think ‘libraries first’ in delivering services to communities, and ensure that there is recognition of the valuable contributions that library services make to their strategies and priorities.”***

This is an exciting project and will ultimately contribute to understanding the importance of libraries as ‘cultural hubs’ within our communities now and in the future.

Project Aims

- To recognise and promote the high-quality creative activities already happening in rural libraries across the UK with relevant case studies.
- Strengthen and boost ambition by sharing resources, contacts, expertise, and knowledge from across the rural touring sector and network
- Fund opportunities to map, review, learn, expand, and develop the touring potential of libraries

- Bring organisations and professionals together to network, support, educate and collaborate on a national scale

Key Project Outcomes

- Case studies from each region of existing library programming sector
- Increase dialogue, networking opportunities and collaborations between Libraries and Rural Touring Partners.
- Increase skills and capacity of public libraries to programme toured work
- Promote mentoring and coaching opportunities
- Promote Rural Touring arts activities in Libraries
- Support libraries to diversify their services and engage audiences with a programme of arts and culture
- Increase appetite and ambition of libraries
- Record, promote and share the results of the project to the network of partners, collaborators and NRTF members
- Deliver the project in line with the NRTF's mission statement and commitments to the Rural Touring Sector

The Project Offers the following opportunities

- The chance to share your experience as part of a national portfolio of case studies identifying common challenges, ways of working, expertise, existing resources, and networks.
- A programme of networking events and forums bringing professional partners from across the Rural Touring sector together, artists, performers, schemes, venues, library representatives and promoters
- Resources and toolkits for supporting best practice, delivery
- Support in the commissioning of new and existing work designed specifically for touring in libraries
- Training labs designed and delivered by those with the knowledge and experience for delivering arts in libraries
- Mentors from across the UK available to support arts in libraries
- 25 Bursaries to attend the NRTF conference in June 2021 - A 3 day event of showcases, talks, resource and ideas sharing, advice, feedback, networking opportunities - inc. a Library Touring Specific programme
- A programme of Go-See opportunities for relevant, Library specific work
- Showcase/menu of Library specific work over 3 seasons from across the UK to inc. Wales and Scotland.

- Free NRTF membership for 2020/2021 which includes access to additional resources, industry support, advocacy and advice, network, and national profile opportunities.

This project has been made possible by a grant from Arts Council England's Lottery-funded Strategic Touring Programme.

Get Involved

Whatever your sector, organisation or role – if you want to know more about this project, how you can get involved or benefit from any of the opportunities listed above please contact Jess Huffman – NRTF Project Manager by emailing: project@nrtf.org.uk

Keep an eye out on our website www.nrtf.org.uk for:

Project updates, news, opportunities, resources and toolkits, a programme of networking, training and go-see opportunities, arts in Library events happening across the UK and relevant sector stories.

Call Out

- Are you a library looking to expand your cultural offer to audiences?
- A promoter looking for new ways to link up with your local library.
- A rural touring scheme looking for artists and Library specific work?
- An artist with a show or an idea that would work well in a library setting?

If you answered yes to any of the above contact us to find out how this project can offer you support:

Contact Jess Huffman NRTF Project Manager:

E: project@nrtf.org.uk

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