

RURAL TOURING ARTS SCHEMES



What they deliver and what they achieve

Rural touring schemes bring a wide variety of quality arts performances to rural communities, where people often live some distance from dedicated and usually town or city-based arts venues. As well as enabling rural audiences to enjoy live performances, they create volunteer opportunities and they frequently deliver participatory events such as arts workshops and training.

Affiliates of the National Rural Touring Forum are part of a network of 24 touring arts schemes which are active across rural England. Research finds that in a typical year they deliver:

Performances:

- ▶ The number of performances put on for rural communities has grown to between 2,000 and 2,500 each year

Venues:

- ▶ These performances take place at between 800 and 1,000 different venues in rural locations each year

Audience size:

- ▶ Total audience numbers have grown to around 150,000 people each year – averaging roughly 70 people attending each event

Art forms:

- ▶ The art forms most often presented are drama and music, followed by film and events aimed at families or children

Turnover:

- ▶ Fourteen of the touring schemes have an annual turnover exceeding £250,000, whilst six (of the other ten) have a turnover between £75,000 and £250,000

Employment:

- ▶ All the touring schemes employ staff, which in ten cases is between 6 and 10 people, whilst in fourteen cases is between 1 and 5 people

Freelancers:

- ▶ Eighteen (or three-quarters) of these touring schemes also make regular use of freelancers

Volunteering:

- ▶ A previous estimate found volunteers contributed an average 58 hours to promote and support each performance, a figure which case studies in this research indicates may be conservative

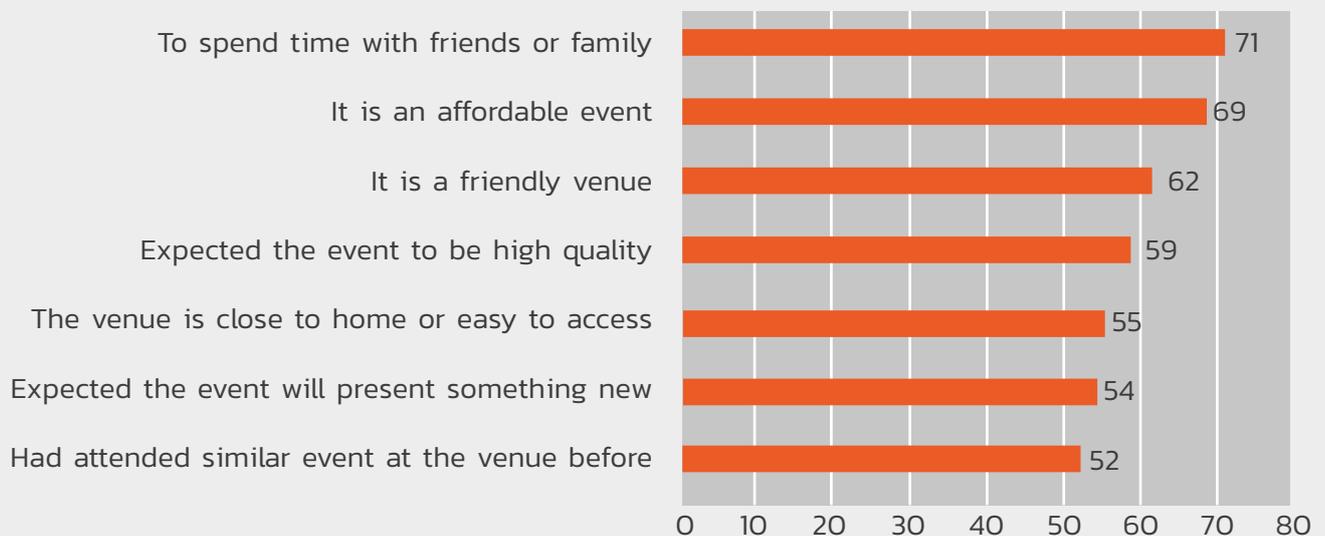
Audience profile:

- ▶ Audiences in the research case studies are a close match with the rural population profile more generally, as measured by average age, socio-economic groups, ethnicity and disability.

Why audiences attend

Audience members at performances, which the research examined as case studies, were asked why they were attending. A majority cited the seven reasons summarised in the graph below.

Main reasons for attending performances: per cent of audience agreeing with reasons



Benefits from rural touring

The research identified a range of benefits from rural touring which are felt by both individuals and communities. These come about because rural touring schemes have a unique reach, by targeting places that would likely otherwise miss out. They thus help ensure people are not disadvantaged by where they live. The benefits can be summarised as follows:

<p>Giving access to high quality performances and arts opportunities</p>	<p>Enriching lives by giving residents in smaller communities' opportunities to enjoy professional arts and cultural experiences. For some, travelling to events held at dedicated arts venues may simply be impractical.</p>
<p>Inspiring take-up or development of interest in the arts</p>	<p>Experiencing performances or engaging in participatory events is the catalyst that inspires some rural residents to develop their own artistic ambitions or to join with others in forming local arts groups.</p>
<p>Building capacity for self-help within rural communities</p>	<p>Growing skills and confidence among residents who take-up volunteer opportunities to organise and promote rural touring events. Volunteers frequently go on to support other local projects or activities.</p>
<p>Adding cohesion and widening networks in rural communities</p>	<p>Presenting inclusive events which typically bring together a broad range of local people for a shared experience. This strengthens existing community bonds and it helps new friendships to form.</p>
<p>Reducing rural isolation and improving wellbeing</p>	<p>Providing a safe space where individuals who feel isolated or lonely have an opportunity to spend some time with and perhaps meet others. This may result in an improved sense of wellbeing.</p>
<p>Growing the sense of place felt amongst local residents</p>	<p>Adding to the pride and sense of belonging felt among communities about where they live. Touring schemes help smaller communities to feel noticed and valued. Volunteers often express positivity and pride.</p>
<p>Helping rural halls or community buildings to remain viable</p>	<p>Helping sustain village halls and community buildings which play a key role within village life. Often other facilities, such as shops or pubs, have closed. Some halls are maintained or improved for performance use.</p>

Creating economic opportunities within rural communities

Rural touring performances often mean opportunities for local catering or hospitality businesses to sell to their audiences. If they result in greater village hall use that also brings in valuable hall hire income.

Touring in rural areas has some distinctive features which are less evident in urban areas. They include:

- ▶ Artists working in rural areas must be ready and able to adapt to a diverse range of venues, facilities and performance spaces.
- ▶ Audiences at rural venues are likely to come predominantly from that local community, so arts events often add to its collective memory.
- ▶ There is scope for performances in some rural places to tap into the culture and identity of the local area.

Lessons for rural touring

Below are some lessons for audience development, tour planning and partnership development that arise from the research.

Audience development:

Touring schemes must strike a balance between providing serious art and entertainment, so that their work is sufficiently accessible to attract audiences whilst still encompassing innovation.

Touring schemes could sometimes go further in offering participatory opportunities for those living in rural communities, alongside putting on performances.

Touring schemes should consider the scope to create complementary opportunities for local (rural based) artists to perform or even to participate in their own performances.

Tour planning:

Touring schemes should trade on their unique professional reputation for providing a quality arts product which can be toured around rural community venues.

Touring schemes should consider where returning to the same rural venues two or more times could help cement or expand the benefits e.g. for capacity building or reducing isolation.

Touring schemes should not give up on rural communities or venues which cease to host them, as decisions often depend on the individuals in charge at any one time and may alter again.

Partnership development:

Touring schemes should consider holding meetings with promoters and involving them in the programme planning process, to strengthen relations and support less experienced promoters.

Touring schemes should consider the scope for including a training offer for some of the local volunteers in the venues they visit and perform at in rural communities.

Touring schemes should seek to engage in partnership development activity, such as that suggested above, in part due to the ongoing need to attract new volunteers and promoters.

Benefits identified from rural touring



This note is based on CONCERTA, a 2019 research report that was commissioned by the NRTF, written by the Centre for Business in Society at Coventry University and funded by Arts Council England. It stands for Contributing to Community Enhancement through Rural Touring Arts.

The research sought to understand the range of benefits brought to rural communities by the 24 ACE-funded touring schemes affiliated to the NRTF. The original full report and its case studies can be found at:

<https://www.ruraltouring.org/project/concerta-social-impact-study-2/>

This research note was produced for the NRTF in February 2021 by Rural England CIC, whose remit is to improve the rural evidence base, as well as ensuring that it is disseminated, debated and used.