

Grants for the Arts Case Study

Evolving in Conversation

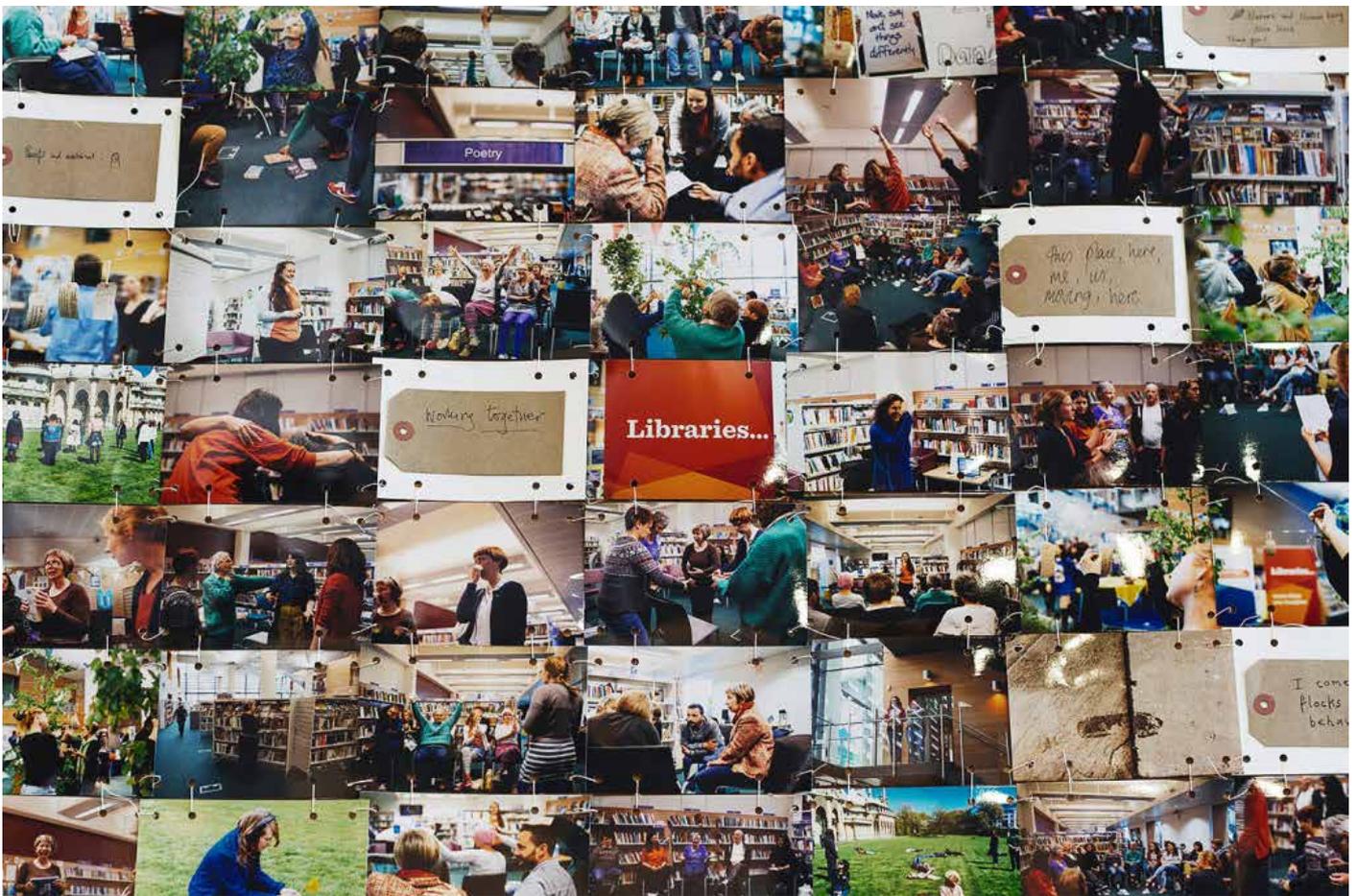


Image by Giovanny Estrella. Image of RSVP by Zoe Manders courtesy of Brighton and Hove Libraries

Kate Regester and Lucy Castle,
Library Community Engagement Managers,
Brighton and Hove Libraries Services



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Case Study Introduction

What will I learn and is it relevant to me?

Themes...

- Libraries
- Community engagement
- Young people

Learning...

- Developing engagement in libraries
- Creating a multi-artform project
- Building successful partnerships
- Achieving staff buy-in

Relevance...

This case study is relevant to:

- Libraries keen to engage their local community
- Artists and organisations keen to work in partnership with libraries to develop new audiences
- Project leaders trying to achieve staff buy-in for their project
- Grants for the Arts applicants who want to find out more about funded projects

Jubilee library is the fifth most visited library in the UK, achieving approximately one million visits a year.

Background

Introducing Evolving in Conversation

Introducing Brighton and Hove Libraries Services

Brighton and Hove Libraries Services are free and open to everyone. There are 14 libraries across the city.

Jubilee Library is the fifth most visited library in the UK, achieving approximately one million visits a year.

Of the 14 libraries, 8 are in shared buildings where other services are delivered such as a Children's Centre, Community Centre and a GP surgery.

Our audiences

The libraries cater for a broad cross-section of the community.

Evolving in Conversation particularly targeted 13 - 34 year olds and adult learners, due to a drop-off in library card holders within this age group.

On average 56% of library users (rising to 64% in Jubilee Library) are 'invisible users' who do not use a library card to take out books or use library PCs but are using other services.

The project

We applied to Grants for the Arts for support with a year-long project in partnership with Photoworks, New Writing South and South East Dance.

We wanted to work together to engage communities who do not commonly engage in arts activities and/or with libraries.

The project consisted of three overlapping phases centred around the theme 'How Can Individuals Make Society Change'.

The theme was explored through free photography, writing and dance workshops and artist commissions, which led to a showcase event at the end of each phase.

There was also a professional day for staff, artists and facilitators at each stage to contribute to the development and evaluation of the project.

Project aims

- To engage communities who do not commonly engage in arts activities and/or with libraries
- To strengthen partnerships
- To cultivate a learning environment
- To engage artists with opportunities
- To explore potential of co-creation through community engagement

Target audience

- Young people aged 13 - 19 years and adult learners who do not currently or infrequently access cultural and library activities

Evolving in Conversation

Engaging communities in arts and libraries

The process

Building partnerships

Arts Council England's Grants for the Arts library fund generated a lot of interest among artists and organisations in working with libraries. We had worked with Photoworks, New Writing South and South East Dance before and decided to develop these partnerships further. All three partners are National Portfolio Organisations and we were keen to align ourselves with that benchmark of quality.

Securing staff buy-in

We invested a lot of time in exploring with staff how arts and culture could help with library targets. We looked at examples where that had worked and addressed some differences of opinion as to what libraries should be doing.

Our involvement in cultural activity in the past attracted new audiences into the libraries. The project built on that and used arts and culture to showcase the full potential of libraries as vibrant and welcoming creative spaces.

It also provided skills development opportunities for staff working alongside facilitators and community workers.

Building the creative teams

Each phase of activity was led by a member of library staff, an artist facilitator and a community or youth worker. We advertised and interviewed for these positions.

For the first phase of the project we issued an open call for a photographer. We shortlisted with Photoworks and then involved potential participants in the final decision so they felt included and invested in the programme.

Recruiting participants

Prior to securing the funding from Arts Council England we had received funding from Cabinet Office Social Action Fund via The Reading Agency to support 100 young people to volunteer in libraries over the school holidays. Funding from Artsworld, the South East bridge organisation, was also secured which supported us to enrich our volunteering offer with an arts programme for 13 - 19 year olds. This enabled us to talk to young people about the project and involve them from the outset.

We also worked with community groups and partners to reach a wider audience. Our collective voice was far louder than any one of us alone.

Planning and consultation

Each strand of workshops was planned and delivered by a member of library staff, a community worker and an artist facilitator. They consulted young people and adult learners throughout the process, testing the idea of co-creation through community engagement.

Artist commissions

With the support of the partner organisations, libraries offered commissions for artists who would create their own work and share their creative process with the community groups along the way.

Those artists started to feed into workshops and helped select the works for the showcase events.

Workshops and showcase events

We invited photographers, writers, dancers and communities across Brighton and Hove to pick books, people or key moments that had somehow changed or inspired them. These formed the stimuli for the workshops.

Phase one consisted of photography workshops for young people. Phase two provided writing workshops for adults. The final phase brought adults and young people together in dance and movement workshops. Each phase fed into the next as the project evolved in conversation.

The resulting photographs, writing and performances were showcased at Brighton Photo Biennial, National Libraries Day and Brighton Festival Fringe.

Skills sharing

Participants were invited to pick something they wanted to share with someone else and worked with the facilitator to plan an informal workshop. Four skills sharing workshops ran at each phase in community libraries and during the showcase events.

Professional days

Each phase ended with a Professional Day facilitated by Culture Shift for artists, staff and community workers. This provided an opportunity for reflection and sharing before passing on to the next phase.

Group choice

We also allocated a group's choice budget so groups could pick something they'd like to do. Inspired by the adults' writing, young people chose to have a creative writing workshop. Meanwhile, inspired by the young people's photographs, the adults chose to do a photography workshop and explore the world through the eyes of their written characters.

Cost

The project cost £175,950, of which Grants for the Arts contributed £99,998.

The library invested in staff development and stock collections and there was a significant amount of in kind support from all partners involved.

Results and recommendations

Changing the world one piece at a time

The results

- 124 artists involved
- 1,059 participants
- 303,397 audience members (live) - this figure is reached by measuring the footfall within the libraries during exhibitions
- 7,653 broadcast/online audience members
- 83 new products or commissions
- 193 performance or exhibition days
- 139 sessions for education, training or participation
- Evolving in Conversation at Jubilee Library was the most visited Brighton Photo Biennial 2014 exhibition

Benefits to Brighton and Hove Libraries and partners

The project has provided a steep learning curve and been incredibly rewarding.

Brighton and Hove Libraries staff have had the opportunity to develop new skills and share existing ones that were previously underused. Some members of staff have been promoted to higher grade positions within the libraries. There is a different outlook now on what is possible as a member of staff.

All organisations have benefited from working together and learning from each other. Partners observed that libraries offered safe spaces for exploring artforms, attracting people from different backgrounds with differing levels of experience.

Working together has provided an opportunity to share and develop new audiences. Non-traditional arts audiences have experienced high quality arts. Non-traditional library audiences have experienced the library as a community hub with a diverse offer.

Benefits to audiences

Evolving in Conversation has brought lots of different people together to share new experiences and find out more about the libraries.

The opportunities for participants to share their skills with others has helped develop confidence and leadership ability. An unemployed gentleman took on a leadership role within one of the groups and has now found employment.

Some young people have received Arts Award accreditation through involvement in the project.

Young people and adults continue to be engaged with libraries and have created their own groups or attend groups that meet in the library.

Recommendations

- Invest time in ensuring all members of staff see the value of the project - your team will make or break it
- Plan for continuation - giving staff the opportunity to work alongside artist facilitators has developed their skills and given us options to continue the activity beyond the end of the project
- Build mutually beneficial partnerships - working with partners naturally opens up a wider audience and provides opportunities to develop best practice
- Develop a simple model and repeat it - the three phase approach used the same model of activity each time and really helped to establish trust and encourage everyone to be less risk averse
- Keep communication simple - a simple message is far more likely to be understood and shared
- Combine community and professional - participants and professional artists can learn from one another to develop their processes
- Play with different artforms - it encourages artistic experimentation and cross-pollination of audiences

Find out more

www.citylibraries.info

www.evolvinginconversation.co.uk