

Among Ideal Friends



Executive summary

Creating accessible family theatre experiences
with libraries in the East Midlands





At the heart of our communities libraries provide a safe and familiar space to engage in new experiences. Live theatre transform these familiar spaces – not because of extensive sets and special effects but because children (and adults) are swept away by the power of the performances.

The opportunities to watch and be part of a live show in an everyday space opens up the experience to many new children, families and schools in a way that not only broadens their cultural participation but also their creative curiosity.

Councillor Sarah Russell
Deputy City Mayor with responsibilities for
Children, Young People's Services

In the early part of 2016 The Spark Arts for Children in partnership with libraries across the East Midlands established a new touring theatre consortium specifically for the presentation of performance work in libraries. The new consortium, Among Ideal Friends, aimed to deliver and transport high quality book / story based performances and workshop activity for children 5-11 years, their families and schools.

Over an 18 month programme The Spark toured five seasons of theatre performances and workshops to libraries in Leicester, Leicestershire, Rutland, Nottingham and Nottinghamshire. The tours gave families and schools new opportunities to take part in arts and culture, experiencing high quality theatre at venues on their doorstep. Each season involved one play with an associated programme of audience development workshops, bespoke marketing and audience development plans developed in consultation with each partner authority.

What we delivered

151 Performances
in **54** Different libraries
& community venues
7,961 Audience members
5,827 Children
2,134 Adults

Season 1

A Boy and A Bear in a Boat

by Stewart Melton, adapted from the award-winning novel by Dave Shenton.

Season 2

The First

by Jayne Williams, a play for school groups based on the global events of World War I.

Season 3

Big Sister Little Brother

a retelling of *The Emperor's New Clothes* by Mike Kenny.

Season 4

Where the River Runs

by Full House Theatre in association with Motionhouse, a dance theatre performance.

Season 5

Sylvia South and the Word Catcher

by Finegan Kruckemeyer. A new play produced especially for libraries, commissioned by the Among ideal Friends touring network.

Family Engagement

Seasons 1, 3, 4 and 5 engaged families in seeing quality theatre with their children.

We went to see Sylvia South and the Word Catcher last year, and it was striking how effective libraries are as inclusive venues - brilliant community representation, and at linking creative arts to literacy and learning. My daughter read the script all by herself.

Jo Webb - [@jwebbery](#)

1 in every 4 shows **SOLD OUT**
100% capacity or more

78% capacity of 10,220
available tickets

1 in 5 Had never seen a
theatre show with
their child before

**Had seen theatre in a
library before %**

23% **>** increasing to **38%**
Season 1 Season 5

82% Net Promoter Score



Season 1 Season 3 Season 4 Season 5 overall

UK Children & Family shows - 71%

Audience Spectrum Profile Children & Family Shows

Economic, social and cultural barriers for cultural engagement are of shared interest to those working in libraries and the arts



High Engagement



Medium Engagement



Low Engagement

Among Ideal Friends National



Connecting with Schools

Seasons 2 & 3 invited school groups into their local library, performing to 2,862 children in 25 different libraries, championing cultural education.

58% of schools had not been to a library before as a class or school for an activity

92% developed class activities around *The First*

1,915 new stories generated by inspired young writers

The play engaged children and adults from the outset... the questions at the end helped to draw the story to a close and helped the children to think about what might happen to the characters next.

Peter Phillips, St Annes Primary School, Worksop

It has made me realise how little we utilise the library so this is something we will address

Killisick Junior School, Nottingham

The visit was fantastic. I cannot stress how much we enjoyed it and how valuable we feel it has been. We would love to be contacted again if any other opportunities arise like this. Thank you

Barnby Road Academy, Newark

Project Successes

Through a partnership approach **Among Ideal Friends** successfully:

1. developed the first pan-regional consortium of touring performance work specifically for library spaces
2. delivered a shared programme of high quality produced, presented and participatory performance activity which would not be affordable or achievable working alone
3. maximised the role of the library as a focal point for extended cultural activity
4. built new and increased audiences for truly great book / story based work for children, schools and families within the community
5. increased the skills and capacity of staff through training to ensure libraries have effective leadership and delivery skills to enable long term success and continued engagement in arts and cultural activity

Thinking Forward

Projects like Among Ideal Friends can help libraries deliver diverse cultural programming as part of a contemporary and comprehensive library service for all. Encouraging ongoing use of the library and tying in to other library activities.

From an arts organisations perspective, libraries are a valuable frontline cultural

infrastructure, they are well connected to their respective communities, especially young audiences.

Libraries can play an critical part in the cultural education partnerships as well as offering a place that children do not view as extensions of 'work' while discovering new experiences and reading for pleasure.

Future considerations

Develop a sustainable business model

You should use simple pricing to build contributions from little or nothing to ensure a quality offer and commitment from all partners and the audience.

Build around the immediate impact

Plan for longevity by taking into account a wide range of past audience journeys and future trajectories across libraries, reading and the performing arts.

Share learning with partners

There are many valid methods and languages for describing engagement. Be specific yet ambitious, acknowledge your unique context and think ahead to the future success of your next project.

Libraries are universal but not homogenous

Arts organisations can better understand and leverage the neighbourhood level nature of libraries. Audiences appreciate a strong and varied artistic programme as much here as they do in traditional venues.

Libraries are viewed as safe spaces for learning and discovery, and can open doors for children, inspiring them to seek knowledge not only within arts and culture but in every aspect of their life.

Peter Knott
Area Director, Arts Council England

Get Involved

Among Ideal Friends is growing. The Spark has secured funding from Arts Council England's National Lottery supported Strategic Touring fund to expand the project for a further 3 years, creating and touring family theatre in to libraries until Summer 2020. In addition to the performances the project will train and support the library service as Artsmark Partners playing an active role in Cultural Education Partnerships locally.

If you would like to get involved or would like to know more about The Spark Arts for Children or any of the other work we do with libraries please get in touch

email info@thesparkarts.co.uk

Call 0116 261 6893

www.thesparkarts.co.uk

 SparkArtsFestival   @thesparkarts

More information

The Spark commissioned an independent evaluation of the project led by Richard Fletcher, De Montfort University. rfletcher@dmu.ac.uk. For a full copy of this report visit www.thesparkarts.co.uk/amongidealfriends or contact The Spark.

The Spark Arts for Children is a company limited by guarantee, no.5254229 | Registered charity no. 1106952.

Design by mooli.com | Images by Pamela Raith



Supported using public funding by
**ARTS COUNCIL
ENGLAND**

the spark
arts for children



delivered by

