

Case study

Prosper: Out of the storm

Canterbury Festival

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Background

Canterbury Festival is an annual international arts festival that runs for 2 weeks every October. Now in its 30th year (in its current incarnation – the original Festival started in the 1920s), the Festival uses over 30 venues across the city to host over 200 events from all genres attracting 70,000 visitors.

The Festival, as one of the Arts Council's National Portfolio Organisations, is continually striving to maintain a year-round presence as a strategic leader in the region, driving forward new projects and supporting the local arts scene. This is in addition to its primary purpose of programming national and international performance. Over the past ten years, the Festival has produced a number of successful public engagement projects including 'The Promised Land' (2006), an opera featuring a hundred local singers and 'Blink' (2011), a community performance on Margate seafront. These projects notwithstanding, the Festival was eager to lead a project that engaged more deeply with the wider arts scene in East Kent and that contributed to increasing the cultural capacity of the region.

As a response to the current economic climate, falling funding and the quest for sustainability, Canterbury Festival has pioneered a new model of culture-led transformation through sustainable creative practice. The initiative, called Prosper, has been designed and produced by The MAP Consortium and Workers of Art and is funded by the Arts Council England.

Objectives

Prosper is about unusual ideas, unlikely connections and untested partnerships that explore:

- Social change – how collaboration can make a difference to the way people build, serve or transform their communities or organisations
- Place – how collaboration can shift or encourage a different understanding of, connection to or commitment to a place
- Interdisciplinary Work – how collaboration between artists from different disciplines can develop new skills and thinking and produce adventurous work

We also wanted to minimize the emphasis being on result-led evaluation; the aim of Prosper was to allow for experimentation without the pressure of producing extensive results.

Target audience

Each of the projects had their own target audiences, ranging from children of army families to women suffering from Alzheimer's. However, from the Festival's perspective, we wanted to engage with partners from outside of the cultural sector whilst also strengthening our links with the creative scene across East Kent.

Process

The introduction for the project started with a number of Gatherings that took place between June-August 2012. These were events that featured inspiring speakers, guidance and creative support to help potential collaborators to seek out partners, conjure up ideas and formulate opportunities.

The main requirement to be involved in Prosper was that each Experiment had to include three main partners, one of which had to be from outside of the cultural sector. Thirteen projects were successful in receiving investments of up to £5,000 to enable them to research, prepare for and carry out a small but practical Experiment from which they gain insight, energy and ambition.

The final stage of the project sees five Adventures receiving a much larger investment to complete a full project. One project is further developing a sound installation of nightingale song in Margate High Street as a result of positive feedback from local police on a reduction of anti-social behaviour. Another is specialising in using digital technologies to create a new dance aesthetic and explore the connections between movement and well-being in older people. A third is creating a boat art installation / market stall intervention, which links the situation of artists and the fishing industry in seaside towns to the theme of sustainability.

Perhaps one of the most imaginative collaborations is 'White Horses'. This has brought together artist Tracey Falcon, Whitstable Yacht Club and Canterbury Christ Church University. Their Experiment saw them take aerial photographs of the Yacht Club in action, which they transferred into a spectacular collage of images on a yacht sail that has toured around various boat shows. At one event over 9000 people engaged with the piece, providing almost unanimously positive feedback. The team have now created a flotilla of sails printed with commissioned artworks, offering an unexpected gallery experience on sea and shore.

A Student Makers Market was the idea of the newly formed community interest company, Future Foundry, the Canterbury City Partnership and Canterbury Market, working with students from all three Universities in Canterbury. As there was no moderation for inclusion, this project relied purely on students having the drive and initiative to take part, but even the freezing temperatures and 4am start did not deter the participants with over twenty stalls at the first market. Visitors and stallholders alike were a new audience for the Festival as historically students are a group the festival has found difficult to engage.

To date, Prosper has directly benefitted thirty-nine individuals and organisations, and indirectly engaged with thousands.

No. of participants – 601

No. of audience – 17,326

No. reached online – 37,562

No. of additional supporting organisations – 69

No. of additional supporting artists – 59

Value of generated support in-kind – £61,901

A series of events and exhibitions will take place during this year's Festival exploring the results of the various projects. It is hoped that many of the collaborations will continue working together beyond the end of the funding.

Analysis of partners' final reporting shows significant trends in the following areas:

- High levels of engagement across all Prosper Experiments in attracting high value in kind support
- Evidence of high levels of additional labour provided by both Prosper Experiment partners and their extended networks
- The ability of some cultural partners (eg. Turner Contemporary) to successfully integrate their existing programmes with Prosper Experiments
- The capacity of Universities to provide high value additional support to enhance Experiment activity

Key points for effective practice

Prosper was funded by the Arts Council England, and was designed and managed by The MAP Consortium and Workers of Art. The core Prosper team consisted of three facilitators and three Festival staff members.

Of course not every project was entirely successful: a drop-out, lack of direction and over-ambition were some of the downsides to the freer model of evaluation. However, by allocating a member of the Prosper team to each Experiment, this was minimised and lessons were learnt from every process, whatever its outcome.

Conclusions and recommendations

Whilst Prosper's main objectives were to raise awareness and to widen the Festival's engagement with the cultural sector in the region, it was never meant to directly translate into increased ticket sales. Through Prosper, the Festival team has worked closely with individual artists and newly formed companies whilst also continuing to engage with some of the main bodies in the region like the universities and the Councils.

Most excitingly, Prosper has allowed the Festival to get to know organisations outside of the sector (for example the Whitstable Yacht Club, the Deal Fishermen and the Margate Town Team) where there was previously no relationship.

As an example, on 11 Aug 2013 the White Horses Team launched their floating art gallery in Whitstable. Hundreds of people stopped to watch and the sight of the sails as the yachts hit the water was awesome – and fingers crossed the project will continue to grow well beyond the end of Prosper.

Additional information

- <http://prospertogether.co.uk/>
- www.canterburyfestival.co.uk
- Twitter: @prospertweets
- <https://www.facebook.com/prospertogether?fref=ts>