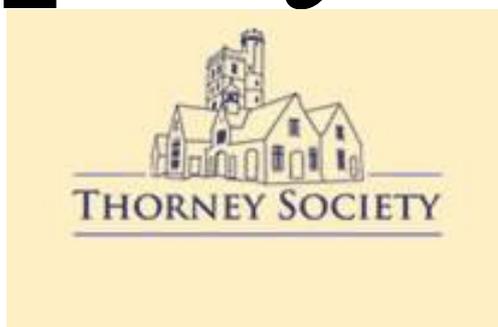


Case study

In praise of projects



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Background

- The Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) aims to make a lasting difference for heritage, people and communities across the UK. Its Sharing Heritage grant programme is for any not-for-profit group wanting to explore their community's heritage with grants from £3,000 to £10,000.
- In 2013, HLF East of England was approached by a local museum in Thorney, a village outside Peterborough, for funding to develop resources for people with visual impairments.
- Since 1987 the Thorney Society, a community charity, has run the independent Thorney Museum, open to the public during the summer in a converted Victorian building. It covers the local story of the Fenland island from its medieval abbey to the railway. The Society's aims are to run the museum, work with other local cultural and heritage organisations, provide village tours and assist local schools.

Objectives

The objectives of the project were to:

- develop new resources for visually impaired visitors and people wanting to research the history of the local area;
- train volunteer stewards in how to support visitors with sight difficulties;
- work with professional partners to develop the skills and knowledge of a small team;
- raise external funding to enable the project to take place.

Target audience

Visitors and researchers interested in the local history of Cambridgeshire, affected by visual impairments.

Process

- In developing the project idea, the Society approached members of the neighbouring Thorney Abbey, and a consultant at the Royal National Institute of Blind People (RNIB) in Peterborough.
- The Society then investigated funding sources, identifying that the Heritage Lottery Fund's aims to help a wider range of people engage with heritage, and develop skills in the sector, would be an excellent match for the project.

- The Society then researched their proposal in more detail, including a good idea of costs, and applied to the Sharing Heritage scheme. They were successful in receiving a grant of £7,200 in May 2013.
- Once awarded, the team used the funds to commission Sue King, advisor at RNIB, to help them produce material to support visually impaired visitors, including tactile and braille guide books for the Abbey and Museum, as well as large print guides and a handling collection.
- RNIB also delivered a training course for museum stewards, Abbey guides and local people to get an insight into the needs and requirements of people affected by visual impairments, also attracting staff from larger museums at Ely and Denny Abbey.

Outcomes

The project was successfully delivered, and exceeded the expectations of the project team. Since completion it has been used by the RNIB as a case study, and each partner has increased their awareness of accessibility and heritage. Outcomes included:

- additional restricted income for the museum;
- improved resources for visitors with visual impairments, including braille guides describing what heritage objects look like and how they are structured, from medieval manuscripts to glass, buildings and an organ;
- excellent visitor feedback, including from a young visually impaired visitor who ordered a print of the Abbey booklet to take home;
- change in people's attitudes, with training affecting the way volunteers, print designers and staff think about the difficulties visually impaired people face;
- increased cooperation and communication between local heritage groups and a raised profile for the museum, improving sustainability and volunteer skills;
- sharing practice with organisations around the country, including a church in Oxford which plans to produce a similar set of books for their church and museum;
- RNIB using project material for training volunteers and as examples of best practice for RNIB courses in Birmingham and for Museums in Scotland;
- RNIB has uploaded the artwork of images from the books onto their Load2Learn website that enables the artwork to be downloaded and used for educational purposes both in UK and internationally;
- incorporating the approach into other areas of the museum, especially work with schools, using tools as a way to engage young people, including a school for autistic children, with heritage objects and information.

Key points for effective practice

- Thorney Museum was successful in receiving a grant as it had carefully considered the aims of the funder it was approaching and had developed a project that clearly matched HLF criteria.
- In addition, they had clearly identified gaps in expertise, and developed strong partnerships (with local heritage organisations and the RNIB) to support this. The project responded to a local need and this was well described.
- They had also thoroughly considered the project costs, aims and outputs, and presented a simple yet effective proposal, that appeared low risk.
- The project offered additional, unforeseen benefits for the grantee, by developing its links locally and raising its profile with other, larger heritage attractions and audiences. By training volunteers in new skills and enthusing local people about engaging diverse audiences, the museum is now in a better position.
- In terms of future work, it is hoped that the project can be extended to additional audiences, and that the grantee can further promote the museum's accessibility online and work with new visually impaired groups.

Conclusions and recommendations

- An example of how a small volunteer-led museum group can make a difference to the lives of their visitors, as well as have a wider impact.
- At first glance the project may seem specific, but the impacts have been felt across the organisation, with outputs used as examples of best practice by a range of other groups across the country.
- Demonstrates how vital it is to consider audience needs, develop a target group and respond in an informed way.
- By delivering a funded project, you can make a difference to your organisation's sustainability, links with local and national groups, the skills of your staff and your audience's experience.
- Underpinning all of this is the importance of identifying when you need external support and making sure you approach the right funder, presenting a clear, balanced proposal, with well-developed costs, and being passionate about your subject.

Further information

Thorney Museum: <http://www.thorney-museum.org.uk/>

Heritage Lottery Fund: <http://www.hlf.org.uk/>

About CultureHive

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