

Running Community Projects Toolkit

Written and produced by Worcestershire Archive and Archaeology Service

Introduction

Community projects are great, working with local people on a joint project. It's a great form of community engagement, one with a defined start, middle and end. You get local people involved, often using your collections and resources and hopefully creating useful content. They will get something out of it too, being part of a joint activity, learning new skills and information, learning more of what you do, and feeling a connection to their local area.

Many aspects of running community projects are the same as any project. Ensure that you plan in all your activities with full costings and know who does what. A community project will include all this and you need to follow the normal procedures, but in-built to the project will be active and meaningful community involvement. This may be through individual volunteers taking an active role or working with specific community group(s). So each stage will need to take that into account

Guiding principles

- 1. Know what you want to do** - Identify why you want to do it and how it is linked to your overall aims and objectives. Any project should link to this and there should be direct benefits to you and others.
- 2. Work in partnership** - A community project needs to be a true partnership with ownership and input from the individuals and groups involved. Agree what happens and who does what at the start. Respond to their needs and ideas to shape, or re-shape if applicable, the project as it goes along.
- 3. Communication** - Keep a two-way dialogue going so everyone knows what is happening and any questions can be answered. Ensure people feel informed and involved; recording changes will help.
- 4. Mutual benefit** - Community projects should be inclusive and enjoyable and everyone involved (whether individuals, yourself or partner organisations) should get something out of it. This might include creation of a final product, social interaction, learning new skills or something else.
- 5. Ensure there is a legacy** - The output of the project should be of value in the future, whether a piece of art or research, so participants can see what they contributed and share the result. Will your partners have benefitted longer term too, through new skills, resources and experiences?

Set your goals

Remember to set SMART goals

Specific: Set out your project highlighting different aspects you want to achieve, although these may need to be adapted depending on feedback from the community.

Measurable: As well as being able to say if the different parts of the project were achieved, keep a record of people involved and time committed on both sides and changes made through the shaping of the project.

Achievable: Can you do this within your budget and time capacity? Projects can use lots of resources so you need to be sure you can do what you promise before you begin.

Realistic: Do you and your partners have the resources in place to deliver?

Time: Plan out the timescale of the project so everyone can see what's planned. Check that this is sufficient.

Conduct an audit

- What is your community? Check what you know about your community and who you want to work with.
- List the connections you already have. Many of your staff and volunteers will already have connections, and your regular visitors too.
- Define what you want to do. Projects shouldn't run for the sake of it. If there is something you want to achieve such as an exhibition or research goal, such as research into the local area, link this to your overall aims and objectives.
- Identify your strengths. What can you offer as part your project, such as venue, collections, and skills which can be passed on? What resources can be utilised, perhaps ones which are underused at present?
- What capacity and skills do you have to run a community project? They take planning, organisation, budget and leadership. Day to day admin takes up more time than you think. If it feels too big you may need to leave it, delegate or apply for additional support funding.

Guidance and tips

Start with your organisation audit. Know what you want to do and look at who could help or partner you.

Draw up a draft of what you would like to achieve in the project, aims and objectives, outputs and outcomes. Define this so it is easier to share with others. This is still a draft and should be left open to be guided by others for it to be a true community project. Expect, and allow for, differing ideas and be ready to mitigate any potential conflict.

Reach your community – Where possible you will have contacts and links with your community already. Put in time to undertake preparatory work. You may be looking at reaching individuals, asking for people to get involved, or work with existing groups. Spend time thinking about the best ways of contacting people, ensuring that they will feel involved.

Plan and consult – A community project will follow the similar planning processes as most other projects, requiring the same work on budgets, timescales and specifying actions. In addition, community projects will involve consultation and input from others. Plan in your consultation, whether through surveys, informal feedback or meeting with groups and individuals. A Steering Group may need to be established with community representatives to oversee the direction of the project. This must be meaningful and take actions based on feedback. Who is responsible for the daily running should be agreed, whether someone from your organisation, a committee or an outside person employed or appointed?

Running the project – Again the running of a project will follow the pattern for most projects. Ensure there is a project plan which all partners are signed up to.

Ongoing consultation – As a community project ensure that people feel involved. A Steering Group can be a formal way of ensuring joint decisions and oversight. Plan in opportunities for other feedback too and make sure participants know this. The direction should be jointly agreed so people feel fully part of it and feel ownership. See if another organisation is doing a similarly sized project with public engagement and if they have written notes including mitigated issues.

Handy hints

- Developing a partnership takes time, and you may need lead-in time before asking partners if they'd like to be involved in a project.
- Research your community.
- Elected members can be great for contacts and connections.
- Running community projects can take time too, with extra communication needed.
- Remember to take photos. It's easy to forget and then realise you've not got as many as you'd hoped at the end when writing your report up. You may also find a low-cost audio recorder a benefit in supporting any notes and photos taken

Worcestershire Archive & Archaeology Service case study - Worcester Archive Source Project

This project, funded by Heritage Lottery Fund, enabled the Worcester City archive to be catalogued over a 4-year period. Just as important was the public engagement.

The public engagement involved several smaller community projects. During the development of the project bid various local organisations had been consulted and involved to help shape the bid, and several of these were able to be involved in separate sub-projects. So we were able to have a lead-in time with the groups.

Time was spent developing contacts and talking to community groups who would be interested and who we could work with. Although there were parameters for the overall projects, the shape and direction of the strands were decided jointly.

The individual projects had a wide scope, and from our perspective just needed to be a creative project linked to the archives, so we spent time discussing with group members what they would like and discussing options. A popular choice was creating artwork in response to workshops on the archives, and artists were employed to work with communities to create art, often map based, which could then be hung in a local centre. It was important that as well as finding out about the project and the archives, people also learnt new skills, directed the end product, and gained generally from being involved. The end of each separate project was a celebration event with the unveiling of the artwork and the chance to invite family and friends along too.

Action plan

Short term actions

- Think through what you are doing, what project you would like to do and what you have that would connect with or interest your community, so you have a list of what you can offer.
- Brainstorm who your community is and write down what you know. You may want to investigate this further. Remember to consider if there are segments of the community you might have inadvertently overlooked.
- Come up with a list of contacts from what you do already, your staff and volunteers and regular visitors.
- Draw up a draft plan of a project that you can share with people, which has timelines and budget.
- Prioritise people to contact and start getting in touch to introduce yourself.

TOP TIP: You probably have links already, so use those.

Medium term actions

- Draw up a Steering Group, whether made up from individuals who are interested or group representatives. Decide the scope of this group, frequency of meetings.
- Identify what you have or do which would benefit the people or group you are working with.
- Decide on a project plan jointly with timescales, budgets and to-do items, with responsibilities clearly defined. It is often helpful that those responsible have a 'second' - a person who can be contacted in case the primary person is out of contact for whatever reason.
- Apply for funding, if needed. Ensure you are aware of any bid's requirements.
- Publicise the project using your own communications, such as social media, and within the community itself and use the committee members' contacts. If you need help later then this awareness can be important.

TOP TIP: Be clear about how the project will be managed, and how you'll ensure it truly reflects the local community.

Long term actions

- Ensure Steering Groups meet regularly and that the project is set up to respond to their direction and receive updates from others in good time.
- Plan in ways to keep in touch with participants, formally and informally. Use regular communications to keep them informed and ensure they know how they can get in touch if they have questions or ideas.
- Plan in an end of project celebration event. Mark the successes and the completion, which enables everyone to see what happened. It's an opportunity to invite family, friends, funders and key stakeholders, as well as the press.
- Complete evaluation. Decide what evaluation is needed and bring it together to show how the project went. This includes keeping photos of the project as it goes along.
- Discuss ways of working beyond the project end date. This could be a follow up project, or closer working on a regular basis.

TOP TIP: Publicise what you do. This can help with future projects with others too as they can see how a previous project went and what the community thought of it.

Evaluation

Did you manage to achieve the intended outputs? That is one way to measure. However, there are other important parts to evaluate too.

Survey at the start and end of the project to find out what people thought about it, and what they already knew. This needs to be proportionate so may just be a few simple questions.

At the end of the project, take the opportunity for people to give longer answers and talk about social benefits too, for instance feeling part of a community, working with others, and improved mental health. Generic Social outcomes are one way of expressing this. Keep records of people's time involved.

Resources & further reading

Historic England Places Strategy document, which includes community projects.
<https://historicengland.org.uk/content/docs/planning/he-places-strategy-2019/>

10 steps for starting a community project
<https://blog.prepscholar.com/community-service-projects> American blog, but contains useful steps.

Community Project Handbook from Mayor of London Office.
https://www.london.gov.uk/sites/default/files/community_projects_handbook_web.pdf

Planning and organising events
<https://www.resourcecentre.org.uk/information-category/organising-events-and-activities/planning-and-organising-events/>
Guide produced by The Resource Centre, a charity serving community groups in Brighton and Hove.

Pool of ideas and case studies for transforming volunteering in the heritage sector
www.heritagevolunteeringgroup.org.uk

National Lottery Heritage Fund evaluation guidance
www.heritagefund.org.uk/good-practice-guidance/evaluation-guidance

Organisations

Association of independent museums <https://www.aim-museums.co.uk/>

Museums association <https://www.museumsassociation.org/>

Explore the Past

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