

Libraries West Touring Programme Evaluation Summary

57 performances | 45 schools | 29 libraries in 7 library services

Audiences of 2,207 children and 357 adults



- Taking children's theatre into the heart of communities
- Working together to build audiences for children's theatre
- Supporting libraries to develop as performance venues
- Increasing children's engagement with libraries
- Learning and sharing practice across the arts and libraries sector

Why tour theatre to libraries?

"I thought that the performance was amazing. It was the best one I have seen and I would like to see more. **That performance made me happy.**"

- Year 6 audience member, Bishopsworth Library

"The performance was **outstanding** - pupils completely engaged and I could see strong links that **supported some of our pupils** who are undergoing emotional events in their own lives. Pupils really enjoyed it and generally agreed that they would now like to go to the theatre more."

- Year 6 Teacher

"I feel it is an excellent project. Taking children out of their classroom and doing something completely different is really important. **Libraries, the performing arts, informal education - all these things are very important for children.** Judging by the questions asked (Are you two Australians? Are you two brother and sister? Were you very sad when your sister died?) shows to me that some of the children were taken to outback Australia and entered another world beyond Midsomer Norton. Empathy, sympathy, understanding: these are difficult things to teach."

- Librarian, Midsummer Norton

Libraries West, one of the largest consortia of public libraries in the country, worked with Travelling Light Theatre Company, South Gloucestershire Council and Gloucestershire Libraries throughout 2016 to produce a tour of children's theatre to library venues across the West of England. Supported by Arts Council England's Strategic Touring Programme, the project sought to develop libraries as venues for touring performance, increase library staff skills to present live performance, and increase library use by children through performances for school and family groups. In addition to delivering project activity, LWTP adopted an action research approach to explore the strategic and developmental aspects of the project.

Why children's theatre?

Library user data shows that children's library use declines sharply following their transition to secondary school. The Libraries West Touring Programme (LWTP) selected a performance aimed at Year 6 children in order to increase their engagement with their local library whilst still at primary school. Following an open selection process, Travelling Light Theatre were invited to be the project's artistic partners with their production *The Mysterious Vanishment of Pobby and Dingan*, based on a book by Ben Rice.

Libraries are increasingly becoming multi-use community spaces. LWTP set out to explore the role, and future potential, of libraries as performance venues. A project manager visited each library before the show's devising and rehearsal period to understand the needs of each library. Some libraries had low ceilings, unmovable shelving, small spaces for an audience seating area, and poor access for unloading and parking. Issues such as these fed into the design, devising and rehearsal process. Some of this process took place in libraries, rather than the company's rehearsal studio.

The Libraries West Touring Programme wanted to increase children's access and opportunities to see high quality theatre for young people, whilst also supporting Travelling Light reach new audiences and forge relationships with libraries.

The project's key achievements

- 33% of children said that they had not visited the library before. In one authority, this percentage was even higher at 41%.
- For many children this was their first experience of theatre - 36% did not go to the theatre with their family. For those who were frequent theatre goers, *Pobby & Dingan* was a different kind of theatre. Musicals, pantomime and amateur theatre were common experiences for some children, but the intimacy and style of *Pobby & Dingan* was new to them.
- The project evaluation concluded that the project addressed a gap in access to theatre for children. Libraries were regarded as local, informal spaces where children feel comfortable and are therefore more accessible than traditional theatre spaces which can present social, cultural, financial and geographic challenges for some children.
- There was wide recognition from audiences and stakeholders that the production was high quality. A wealth of feedback showed that children, parents, teachers and library staff appreciated the depth of the issues explored in the show.
- The project exceeded the number of children and schools it aimed to involve. Travelling Light felt that the project enabled them to reach new audiences in new venues.
- Library staff increased their skills and knowledge. In spite of the project creating challenges for staff capacity, generally they enjoyed the experience of doing something new and seeing their libraries used in a different way. Staff felt the performance plans, created by the project manager for each library, were invaluable, and have already been using them to support other events and performances for adults in some libraries.

The challenges and key points of learning

Project Manager role

Touring to such a large number of non-theatre venues required additional capacity than was available within Travelling Light's staff team. The project manager role was critical to the success of the project, bringing additional capacity and acting as a central point of contact for all partners.

Communication

There were barriers to overcome between the working practices of local authorities and a touring theatre company. Most of these were practical (for example, file sharing using Dropbox when local authority IT systems do not allow this). Some challenges related to expectations about the project which might have been addressed through more opportunities for discussion in the development phase.

Library membership

In the qualitative evaluation evidence, 86% of children said that they would like to visit the library in the future to borrow items or use the computers. The timescale of the project did not allow for gauging any long-term impact or if children's intention to visit translates into actual library use. Quantitative data from library user records did not show any statistically significant increase in new members which could be linked to the project. Library staff did, however, report independent visits and new joiners to the library by Year 6 children a few days after they had seen the performance.

Staff capacity

The 7 library services all differed in their staffing structure and their capacity to meet the additional demands on their time which the project created. In the majority of authorities, the lead professional (the Children's Librarian or Reading Engagement Manager) undertook co-ordinating the project. In some authorities, this person changed during the lifetime of the project and, in others, the co-ordination was delegated to individual library supervisors. It was evident in the project evaluation that, in the library services where one person co-ordinated the project throughout, they were much more satisfied with the numbers of children they engaged, and the value for money they felt they had from the partnership income they contributed.



Working with cultural partners

One intended outcome of the project which had limited success was engaging cultural venues and rural touring organisations in the action research element of the project. Many cultural organisations were invited to visit a performance and input into the research questions concerning how a touring network for libraries could be developed. Those who did engage in this part of the project contributed rich information to the research, but the partners had anticipated a wider response.

What Next?

LibrariesWest

Libraries West Children's and Young People's Librarians Group continue to work collaboratively on joint initiatives. Since the inception of the LWTP, the majority of library services had seen reduced budgets and further staff restructuring. The addition of Culture to the Society of Chief Librarians' Universal Offer from 2017 could provide opportunities for library services to work in partnership with arts organisations to enhance communities' access to live performance and other arts.



Travelling Light was delighted with the opportunities provided by working in partnership with libraries to reach so many children with little or no previous exposure to theatre. For the company, the learning curve was steep, interesting and rewarding. They very much hope to continue building on this relationship to create more shows that can attract the least engaged audiences into library spaces.

About Libraries West



Libraries West is a consortium of 7 library authorities in the West of England: Bath and North East Somerset, Bristol, Dorset, Poole, North Somerset, Somerset and South Gloucestershire. It is one of the largest consortia of public library services in England, serving a population of over 2.2 million people with over 150 static and mobile libraries. The 7 authorities work together to achieve an economy of scale through combining some administrative functions and a joint catalogue of 3 million items which are inter-loaned to library users across the consortium.

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Evaluation Film

<http://bit.ly/2o4FMqD>



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