

Severn Arts' Application to become an Arts Council of England National Portfolio Organisation (NPO)

Background and context:

The Arts Council of England published its' guidelines and processes for organisations to apply to join its' portfolio following the publication of their new strategy and delivery plan [Let's Create.](#) All applicants must demonstrate a commitment to deliver against at least one of the three outcomes and all four investment principles identified in the strategy. These are:

Outcomes:

- 1. Creative People** - everyone can develop and express creativity throughout their life.
- 2. Cultural Communities** - villages, towns and cities thrive through a collaborative approach to culture.
- 3. A Creative and Cultural Country** - England's Cultural Sector is innovative, collaborative, and international.

Investment Principles:

- 1. Ambition and quality** - Cultural organisations and individuals are ambitious and committed to improving the quality of their work.
- 2. Dynamism** - Cultural organisations and individuals are dynamic and able to respond to the challenges of the next decade.
- 3. Environmental Responsibility** - Cultural organisations and individuals lead the way in their approach to environmental responsibility.
- 4. Inclusivity and Relevance** - England's diversity is fully reflected in the organisations and individuals that we support and in the culture they produce.

Why Severn Arts

We have the chance to become an Arts Council "partner" and one of a network of trusted organisations to deliver quality, ambitious programmes that reflect ACE's strategic aims and align with a national strategy. This will enable us to become more connected, more sustainable, and more collaborative; opening other avenues of investment; allowing us to deliver against our own strategic aims and enabling us to grow and extend our programmes of work. We would also be in receipt of three years' secure funding that includes investment in people, infrastructure, and audiences, as well as the work we produce.

We are in a strong position; we have good governance, robust finances, including moderate reserves and we have a track record in managing large funds through the Music Education Hub and Cultural Development Fund programmes. We have established resilience in the face of the pandemic, and we have continued to operate fully and have expanded our portfolio of activity during the most challenging times, showing our flexibility, adaptability, and ambition. Applying for NPO enables us to consolidate our Business Plan strategic aims and to deliver against our objectives in our delivery plans to grow our audience base; develop our teams and embed sustainable, inclusive practice.

By 2026, our Plan states that Severn Arts will be a robust & resilient organisation, delivering an ambitious new public programme whilst developing excellent creative talent, particularly in the field of outdoor arts.

We will be applying for £400,000 per year for organisational funding, which if successful, will start from April 2023 for three years. This programme will be an evolution of the work started through CDF to:

- blend the international, national & local to produce a relevant & innovative programme
- grow & diversify audiences & participants
- develop, train & recruit talent
- continue to identify, grow, and develop community engagement and festivals

What do we propose to do?

The CDF project The Arches Worcester ends in March 2023. We have built a brand, audience and identified a need for training and infrastructure to support outdoor arts activity in Worcester during the past three years, and therefore our focus for our NPO is on creating an ambitious new programme for the work we have baselined to date. We will also seek to advocate for support and investment for our continued work outside of our NPO application and we would hope that our stakeholders and current partners will see the value of continuing to invest in the work and the impact on the city of the established collaborative partnership approach we have created. Severn Arts has expanded our programmes and incorporated festivals as part of our overall offer and building on this for the future aligns with our strategic aims in our own published Business Plan. The detailed NPO proposal is as follows:

1. A Festivals programme that includes:

- Three festivals per year:
 - The Rising – curated by and programmed for young adults aged 18 - 30
 - Light Night – bringing world class culture through commissioning artists to work in and with communities, creating work in a local context, influenced by and relevant to Worcester
 - Catapult - a brand new festival to showcase raw, fringe & in-development work, including work by emerging commissioned artists working in outdoor arts

2. The creation of an outdoor arts/festivals Hub & centre for creative skills development that includes:

- Physical space to create and test out ideas/work/projects with peers, audiences, and artists - space, resource & paid time to creatives wishing to work in outdoor arts across the UK, in direct response to the sector's expressed needs
- Training and talent development opportunities - supporting emerging artists, community festivals, young people, makers, including Career Pathways –through provision of start-up opportunities such as internships, placements, mentoring & training
- A production centre to train the future workforce for events and creative projects (skills such as producers, crew, technicians, infrastructure, instrument repair etc.) to include formal apprenticeships and internships
- Forum for international, national, and local debate around outdoor arts to include panels, discussion groups, R&D thinktanks and taskforces
- A sustainable infrastructure model with diversified income:
 - Provide direct services (artistic commissioning, technical, production) to others county-wide
 - Work with national partners to deliver England wide training programmes

3. Consultancy and partnership working that includes:

- Undertaking commissions throughout the county in line with our core purpose and mission, to include delivery of community festivals; events; civic work etc.
- Rolling out toolkits, training, and infrastructure to support communities outside of Worcester and beyond to deliver work in outdoor spaces and unusual locations.

4. Community festivals that includes:

- Voluntary and Community Creative Development - to increase the capacity and grow artistic ambition and willingness to take risks, working with them to fundraise and broaden their reach such as Love The Arbo, Worcester Mela, Worcester Carnival and Worcester Music Festival.

5. Community Engagement that includes

- Building on our participatory cultural engagement opportunities with under-served communities in the city such as Lullaby and the Recovery Poem
- Recruiting, supporting, and training volunteers throughout the festivals offer, providing fulfilling roles to develop skills and connect with communities

Support requested from Worcester City Council:

As a partner in the CDF project, we have worked closely with the City Council, University of Worcester and the County Council to deliver a 3-year programme that has resulted in the creation of new physical spaces (5 railways arches for creative industries); a free internationally-respected outdoor festivals programme; a training and development arm for entrepreneurs and graduates, funding and support for key community festivals in the city and a reputation with national funders for delivering excellence and inclusive work. The programme is funded until the end of March 2023. We are seeking to continue to grow our partnership and the programmes to ensure the people of Worcester have access to high-quality, accessible, and thought-provoking creative activities. Severn Arts is committed to developing a legacy for the festivals work and we would like to work alongside the City Council to continue to support community festivals.

We are therefore requesting financial support from the City Council to fund a Community Producer post, to work alongside our Festivals Director to ensure the longevity and prosperity of Worcester's community-led festivals and events, and community engagement in the wider festival programme.

The Role of the Community Producer

As part of the work that has taken place during The Arches Festivals Programme we know that working with local communities and the volunteers running community festivals has had real impact; on the people taking part, on the quality, ambition and skills development of the community festival organisers and through additional investment bought into the City. The evidence from our external evaluation demonstrates this:

- All 4 community festivals have expanded their knowledge of areas such as fundraising, audience development, marketing, governance as well as developing their artistic ambition.
- New partnerships have been developed which will ensure sustainability in the longer term, both Love The Arbo and The Mela have developed relationships with the University which wouldn't have happened without the support of The Arches Festivals programme. The Music Festival has developed a new relationship with St Swithin's Church on its new music programme.

- All of the festivals have developed their evaluation skills which in the longer term will enable them to better programme work that is relevant to the local community.
- High proportion of those attending the community festivals have said that their impression of Worcester has been more positive because of the festivals.
- Worcester Carnival has piloted a new approach by commissioning an artist to work in Dines Green to create a non-fossil fuelled float to address the environmental impact.
- The Mela and the Music Festival have both received support from the Arches Festivals to raise further funding. Both have been successful in their bids to Arts Council, The Mela of just under £15K and the Music Festival of £29K. These new skills will stay with the groups for future use. This has enabled both groups to do more ambitious projects and to provide employment for local artists/producers creating new jobs.

Feedback from one of the festival committees said this on-going support has enabled them to take their time – to consult with the community and find out their views as well as delivering important participative projects. This allowed them to think strategically about their artistic presentation rather than starting with delivery; and is expected to produce a more rooted and authentic product.

“Having support spread out has worked wonders for us. You learn as you go along. We have been able to incorporate new angles we didn't think about at the beginning. Slowly breaking down the learning, taking it a step at a time, better matches the time volunteers have to give. It has also enabled us to become more confident so that we start to find solutions as issues arise. Working like this has made us much more resilient.” Mela Committee

Our current funding has enabled us to work directly in communities outside of the city centre such as Dines Green, Lyppard Grange, Ronkswood etc. Many of these areas are in more deprived areas of the city and to be able to offer free to access high quality arts activities has brought communities together.

“The engagement was far more than I anticipated in the run up and on the night. We have done things before, where an artist has come into the group and a trip is laid on, those haven't been overly successful. There has been a tendency for arts organisations, pressured by Arts Council and other funding, to engage with the community as a tick box exercise and it hasn't worked and we have lost members who have voted with their feet. This was very different. It was more like a partnership.”

Costs

The total costs including salary and on-costs for a part time post would be £20,000 - 5% of the amount applied to Arts Council. We would envisage a one-year post with potential to extend, subject to funding.

The outcome of the NPO application will be announced in October 2022.