



CASE STUDY: Colchester Eco Festival



Cultural Organisation Group:

Sector: Education

Video:

Author: Culture team, Essex County Council

Delivery period of project:

Spring 2022 – Spring 2023



The Story of En-form

INTRODUCTION

As a registered environmental charity, En-form is dedicated to helping make a difference one bit at a time. From recycling plastic, to reducing carbon impacts, to best practice and advice with making homes more energy efficient to reduce fuel bills – the organisation is here to help.

En-form operates a range of environmental projects including the Colchester Eco-Festival, which is run by a committee of volunteers of which many are independent event professionals (Malcolm Laquis-Alden, Martin Reed, Clare Swann).

En-form aims to encourage public involvement in safeguarding and improving the environment, with the objective of contributing towards the establishment of a healthy and sustainable environment in which all communities can thrive by fulfilling the following functions:

- **Provide** comprehensive information on a wide range of environmental issues.
- **Assist** individuals and organisations to make better-informed decisions on how they can help improve and sustain the environment.
- **Act** as a focal point for all local environmental groups.
- **Help** all local groups to achieve their environmental projects by building partnerships with like-minded organisations, helping with both funding and general advice.
- **Inform and educate** the local population on environmental matters by offering a link between schools and other local groups and environmental education services.
- **Inspire** other groups to start and achieve a range of environmental projects, acting as a catalyst and partner.

STAFF BACKGROUND

Martin Reed is a performance storyteller, street-theatre performer, immersive actor, and event organiser. He writes most of his own material and has been involved in writing, performance, and event organisation since 2006.

Malcolm Laquis-Alden is a professional event manager, having been employed for a number of years by the University of Essex. Malcolm is responsible for the legal, safety, security and infrastructural elements of arts delivery at the festival. Malcolm started Colchester Eco-Festival.

Andrew Wilkinson is currently En-form's only full-time employee. Andrew pursued a career in banking for many years but retired early and then became one of the founders of En-form, which he describes as a 'light green organisation' in 1999 and has been its primary 'mover and shaker' ever since.

Claire Swann has performed and run workshops at festivals of various kinds (e.g., Illusive Festival, and Strawberry Fair) since leaving employment at Firstsite. She also runs the performance group, Iloomiloonies (<https://www.facebook.com/illoomiloonies>) who have been involved in many projects in the area.



The 'CHALLENGE' OR 'OPPORTUNITY'

There were several challenges and opportunities with the project.

The 'Backdrop, Art and Storytelling project' - where the festival created backdrops with young people for the children's tent at the Eco-Festival - initially struggled to identify and engage with young people. However, through contacts with the Bangladeshi Women's Group, who meet at Firstsite, they were able to encourage the women's group children to attend the workshops.

Holding sessions at Firstsite introduced the festival to the manager of the 'Young Art Kommunity' (a young people's group). Group manager, Beth Hull, encouraged members to manage a stall at the Eco-Festival. Through Firstsite, the festival was also able to work with Lora Aziz. Lora is a professional visual artist from the Islamic community who ran the visual arts workshops.

On the day of the festival there were serious traffic issues on the A12, as well as in and around Colchester, which was due to numerous events taking place on the same day. The fact that the weekend was busy had both a positive and negative effect.

On one hand there were a great many more people than usual, which contributed to the high attendance numbers at the festival. On the other hand, some artists including, Efua Sey Koi Larbi were delayed, which caused significant problems in terms of scheduling.

However, when they did arrive, Efua Sey put in extra time, and the show was featured on ITV. Some future learning has been that we will focus on quality acts that are within easy traveling distance of the site or, alternatively, ones which can be accommodated locally.



WHY THE GROUP OR PRACTITIONER CHOSE TO PARTNER WITH ECC

The Children's Arts for the Earth Project formed part of the Colchester Eco-Festival 2022 which built on the success of the children's area at the Colchester Eco-Festival in 2021. The festival itself has a number of environmental themes including biodiversity, waste, and recycling, sustainable transport, water, energy, local food and consumption.

It's important that it attracts the general public and not just those primarily interested in environmental matters via the children's activities. It's also important that by engaging in the art activities, the children and their families are exposed to ideas which can support their understanding of the natural environment. This is particularly important in targeting those that are hard to reach as well as those struggling with recent cost of living rises.

The art, culture, and family activities – which took place in the children's tent and baby zone -together with free admittance ensure that the festival attracts all members of society. The children's area project is particularly focused on the issue that many environmentally-based events are lacking in diversity and inclusivity.

What better way to start to redress this than to provide children's activities which are replete with both these things to bring families together, from all sections of society, to take part in fun activities themed on environmental concerns?

Development-wise from an arts perspective represents both an opportunity and a challenge. Combining the promotion of environmental concerns with diversity and inclusivity in a fun way is a challenging ambition. However, all the people involved in the project were enthusiastic, professional, and above all else, creative. Theming all the arts activities towards environmental issues is the brief that all the workshop leaders have to follow. Workshop leaders, such as Baden Prince, chose his material with environmental issues in mind. Similarly, the storyteller Efua Sey Koi Larbi, has a vast store of African mythology to choose from in terms of finding stories that support positive environmental messages.

The Obby's Osstlers street theatre is based around the idea that the costumed figure, Obby, can answer any question. With a little development, it ensures that the answers to questions lead to a further understanding of environmental ideas.

Clare Sams is an artist with a proven track record in delivering high-quality art and fabric designs that support the effort to be kind to our planet; while Karen Rogers uses environmental concepts in her fun and musical, Makaton workshop.

Finally, the Arabic calligraphy workshop highlight this beautiful artform. A set of positive messages, culled from Arabic folklore and other sources, were represented on flags along with their English translations.

WORKING WITH THE COMMUNITY

Creating cultural links with the Islamic community in Colchester was a matter of feeling one's way. Martin Reed attended the Islamic centre on numerous occasions to forge links and spoke with many people. However, members of the community initially engaged with the project left the UK for varying lengths of time.

The Islamic centre is essentially the mosque, and their interests are religious rather than secular. There are some extra-curricular activities for young people, but these mostly centre around football. Therefore, the Islamic centre became the springboard for the festival's involvement with Colchester's Islamic community rather than its focus.

When the festival came to formulating the timetable, venue and content of the pre-festival workshops, the Bangladeshi Women's Association - based at Firstsite - was the community organisation the festival primarily worked with.

THE RESULTS

The storytelling and art project was a success and achieved all its aims. It produced a backdrop for the Eco-Festival stage - while it is difficult to determine an exact figure, more than 1,000 people saw the backdrop on the day - introduced groups of children to storytelling and created links between the Eco-Festival, the children and carers of the Islamic community.

Around 30 children were involved in the artwork, but the links created are strong, so much so that the leader of the Bangladeshi Women's Group, Salma Ahmed, who said: "It would be nice to have an extension of the activity perhaps over the weekend or a holiday period."

Since the eco-festival is free access, and Lower Castle Park has many access routes, estimating how many people attended the various aspects of the festival is quite difficult. Overall, 2,824 tickets were issued but attendees did not have to have one to come to the festival and other indicators point to a much higher attendance.

During the festival, 'clickers' monitored people coming into the park on three of its entrances for part of the day. These returned a total of 3,500 people entering the park. Since the clickers were not on duty all day, the other two entrances were not monitored.

There were approximately 600 people in the park to start with - as contributors to the festival - and we estimate the number of attendees in total was between 4,500 to 5,000 people. The Colchester Gazette reported separately around 4,500. The 2022 festival was certainly a lot busier than the 2021 event which was estimated to have attracted around 3,500.

The stage/arena area attracted crowds all day, but of different sizes and constituents. Probably the maximum crowd was around 250, with large numbers of people also listening from further away. Crowds of around 200 are common when dance groups are on, because it is necessary for people to physically attend the arena to experience these, whereas people can listen to the music being played on the stage from a much wider area.

Given that there were around 11 very different acts over the whole day - six of them dance acts - estimating that over 1,000 different people attended the stage area and saw the backdrop could be viewed as very conservative.

The children's activities in and around the children's tent also had a mobile audience. People were coming and going, and some of the children's activities were on the periphery of the tent rather than in it. Again, there were probably around one thousand visits to these activities throughout the day, including those who experienced the walkabout performances.

Efua Sey's African drumming and dancing workshops were probably the highlight of the activities in the children's tent. Certainly, ITV thought so and spent some time filming them.

Baden Prince's storytelling performance was well attended, it's particularly difficult to acquire reasonably sized audiences for spoken word, so this was quite an achievement. The Obby's Ostlers walkabout performance was presented to a large number of small groups throughout the day and each time a small element environmental understanding was covered. The visual arts workshops taking place in and around the tent were also focused on environmental themes.

One problem we had this year was that the people who had volunteered to do the videography (one with professional-level equipment) did not turn up. Therefore, all the images were taken by members of the committee when they could, which was not all the time because of their other duties. Due to this we intend to commission professional videographers in the future.

HOW THE ECC CULTURE TEAM RESPONDED

The application to the Arts and Cultural Fund clearly outlined how it aimed to engage with the community. The ECC Culture team has supported the project via regular meetings and has offered assistance wherever needed in terms of marketing, PR and general project advice.



GETTING INVOLVED

Here at Essex County Council, we are passionate about Arts and Culture and keen to support projects across the county. If you have an idea you would like to share with us, take a look at the Arts and Cultural Fund page on the Explore Essex website here: www.explore-essex.com/culture/arts-culture-fund and get in touch via email us: culture@essex.gov.uk