



## ARTS AND CULTURE CASE STUDY: The Harwich Festival



**Cultural Organisation Group:**

The Harwich Festival

**Sector:** Festival / Community Arts

**Key groups targeted by this project:** All

**Author:** Culture team, Essex County Council

**Delivery period of project:**

Spring 2022 – January 2023



## INTRODUCTION

The Harwich Festival originally began in the late 1970s as a classical music festival, but it has evolved into a year-round combined arts festival and charity that helps support the local community.

The Harwich Festival also manages the Harwich Arts and Heritage Centre which stages numerous events, including gigs - both local grassroots and touring bands, theatrical performances, art exhibitions and heritage workshops for children.

It also acts as a hub for local arts groups including camera clubs, art clubs, a craft café, ballroom dancing, a ukulele group along with an embroiders guild and local choirs.

## THE STORY OF THE HARWICH FESTIVAL

The festival aims to promote the arts in Harwich and the surrounding area for the public benefit by establishing a regional Arts Hub that provides a diverse range of cultural activities. Not only does the Arts Hub address the needs of all sectors of the community, it also promotes cultural events throughout the year which are located in venues that ensure full engagement with the community.

Peter Davis, the Harwich Festival Artistic Director, has curated the annual festival for over 10 years and Chris Berwick, the festival's General Manager, has over 15 years of working on community driven art projects in North Essex.

Chris Berwick, General Manager, has also overseen the running of the Harwich Arts and Heritage Centre since 2020 and has managed the annual festival and other large events. Chris also a duty manager at The Colchester Arts Centre and runs a grassroots music project which run over 800 events including festivals, such as Kelvedon and Harwich.

## THE “CHALLENGE” OR “OPPORTUNITY”

The Harwich Festival, which worked with many local artists and art groups and established working relationships with a broad range of partners, is now driving forward new community projects in Harwich that are both being led by the Harwich Festival and the artists themselves.

For 2022, they wanted to expand the local aspects of the festival to help give it even more of a community feel than usual, an important priority as 2022 was the first full annual festival since the pandemic.

## WHY THE GROUP OR PRACTITIONER CHOSE TO PARTNER WITH ECC

The festival has been fortunate enough to have had funding and support from ECC during previous projects over the years and have always found the team very supportive and informative throughout both the application process and project management.



## HOW THE ECC CULTURE TEAM RESPONDED

The Harwich Festival application to the Arts and Cultural Fund clearly outlined the Essex residents it aimed to engage with via an exciting programme.

The ECC Culture team has supported the project via regular catch up's, offering assistance wherever needed in terms of marketing, PR, and general project advice.

## THE RESULTS

The Open 20x20 exhibition - which invited the community to submit artwork in any medium that was 20x20 centimeters - saw 583 people attend the Old Chapel in Harwich. Meanwhile the Dovercourt Art Club exhibition attracted almost 800 people at the Esplanade Hall whilst the 'Exploring the Sublime' exhibition at the Harwich Arts and Heritage Centre had an audience of 2,300.

Musicals 'Dracula by Dramatic Pause' at Redoubt Fort and 'Kinder by Smoking Apples' at the Harwich Arts and Heritage Centre provided strong performances, while the Harwich Coral Society Performance at St. Nicholas church attracted an audience of almost 330 people.

The arts and theatre events provided the chance for the Harwich Festival to work with a new section of the local community that they had not previously worked with. Not only did the festival work with many new artists during the 20x20 exhibition, but it also gave many the chance to showcase their work for the first time publicly.

This resulted in a rise and interest in local arts groups with The Dovercourt Art Club, Harwich Camera Club and Craft café all reporting an increase in members as a direct result of these exhibitions. Venues such as the Harwich Arts and Heritage Centre and Old Chapel have seen a large increase in footfall for exhibitions held since the Harwich Festival 2022.

Newer artists such as Maria Barnes and Sandra Wagstaff, both from Harwich, Tina Bullen from Colchester and Lousia Charrington from Tendring, as well as many more, who displayed their artwork at the exhibitions have since gone on to host their own local exhibitions. They have also become involved with Harwich Festival projects, such as the First Arts Fair.

The touring company, Smoking Apples, offered the festival an opportunity to engage with local schools and several classes attended a tour of the set and discuss the puppetry and visual theatre show about the 'Kindertransport'. Providing the schoolchildren with a unique opportunity to see behind the scenes of a professional, yet poignant production, resulted in the festival being approached by school to co-ordinate several community-based projects in 2023.

While attendance for art events during the 2022 returned to pre-pandemic levels, the Harwich Festival saw an increase in overall engagement and formed new working relationships with community groups and schools. At the same time, local arts groups witnessed an increase in membership figures as a direct response to the exhibitions which also culminated in artists collaborating with groups and venues to form new working partnerships for the first time.

Chris Berwick, the festival's General Manager, said: "The response to the project from the community has been immense. There has been a massive increase in the Art Exhibition attendance at the Harwich Arts and Heritage Centre since the annual festival and a lot more people have got involved with the local arts club as well as the craft café classes.

"Community feedback included the fact that people didn't know how accessible the arts can be and where they could attend classes and workshops. In fact, over 2,000 individuals attended the exhibitions in Old Harwich and at the Harwich Arts and Heritage Centre."





## 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](http://www.explore-essex.com/culture/arts-culture-fund) and get in touch via email us: [culture@essex.gov.uk](mailto:culture@essex.gov.uk)