

Big Lottery Fund

Case study brochure:
Reaching Communities and
Reaching Communities Northern Ireland



The Couper Collection Public Art Project, the Couper Collection Public Trust Reaching Communities England

Background

For unemployed young people, including offenders and ex-offenders, finding suitable employment opportunities can be a challenge. In Wandsworth, London, a decline in traditional industrial jobs and a high unemployment rate has meant that local employment opportunities can be scarce. On top of this, the lack of suitable work experience opportunities and difficulties in obtaining a reliable reference create further barriers for young people looking for work.

The project

The Couper Collection Public Art Project was awarded £364,823 from Reaching Communities England to deliver a five year project to provide work experience opportunities for unemployed young people, offenders and ex-offenders. The project offers the opportunity to help renovate a fleet of nine converted barges based on the River Thames. The barges exhibit artwork and art installations by the London artist, Max Couper, in a series of free exhibitions. The barges which Max Couper has owned and displayed work in for over twenty years, contain new artists' exhibitions, host workshops, children's art collections, support an ecological promenade and provide educational tools.

The work involves up to eighteen volunteers on placements of between five and eighteen weeks supervised by two trained freelance marine trade professionals. Referrals are made to the project from three main partners: Jobcentre Plus, the Probation Service and Wandsworth Volunteer Centre. Each volunteer referred onto the project receives training in practical skills such as welding and metalwork, and also gains transferable skills in painting, carpentry and general construction. The volunteers work on joint projects to restore the barges applying the skills they are taught during their work experience. The work undertaken often includes the construction of pontoons (donated by the Army) around the barges and involves improvements to the barge interiors, such as putting in new doorways and windows, improving the insulation and heating in the barges, and building sunken ceilings and partition walls. Beneficiaries receive a detailed report and reference at the end of their work experience which helps to increase their employment and further education opportunities. All the volunteers are from the local area ensuring that the project benefits those who live close by and is embedded in the local community.



Local communities and local primary schools also participate in the project by getting involved in arts projects on the barges. These help to enrich learning by providing the children with access to experiences that they cannot get at school, for example making sculptures.

Impact and Next Steps

The project is making a significant difference to young people's lives with one beneficiary commenting that the project, "made me realise my strengths and what I can offer society." Another young person said, "it's been a good learning experience, I've learnt how to work in a team and have learned how to do a manual job which is something I hadn't done before."

Beneficiaries leaving the project keep in contact with project staff and provide updates on how they are progressing in finding work. Many beneficiaries have gone on to find work or have returned to education. Many had faced considerable challenges in the past but through the project have been given a 'second chance' and have identified new and previously unrecognised talents.

Local communities and local schools have also benefited, giving them a chance to access and get involved in local art projects. This has all happened as a result of the improvements that the volunteers have made to the site which have made it more accessible to all the community.

The project has learned some key lessons around how to work effectively with young offenders. For example they have found it important to have a clear structure for the day's activities, with a timetable which is followed every day, with regular breaks and an agreed start and end time for the day. The success of the project is partly based on the fact that volunteers working on the project come from the local area and are familiar with the local schools that the project is working with. This has helped volunteers see the benefit the project has on the local community. The project manager commented that, "there's good spirit down here and everyone is working together."

The project has worked well with the local partners that refer volunteers onto the project, keeping them informed of the progression of the volunteers as time went by.

At the end of Reaching Communities funding, the project hopes that the project site will be further developed and become attractive to other potential funders. Income generation options are also being explored including the possibility of one of the project's pontoons being used as a jetty to provide a rental income.

Contact Us

For more information contact Max Couper on 020 7350 0422, or info@coupercollection.org.uk
Or visit their website at www.coupercollection.org.uk/

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