



plugged in

Get Plugged In to Community Promoters

A venue guide to setting up and working with
Community Promoters
March 2016

Why get plugged in?

The Plugged In project was set up in Pennine Lancashire to open venue doors and diversify programming. The venues we worked with traditionally programmed comedians, music and tribute acts but saw theatre and art as too financially risky. These were venues which the local community had lost faith in and audiences, particularly for theatre events, were decreasing.

The Plugged In model allowed community promoters to choose and host their own events, much in the same way rural touring does. A programmer created a menu of professional touring theatre, art and music for promoters to choose from. Once an event had been chosen the community promoters worked with the venue to market these events and then host them on the night.

By working with community promoters, Plugged In rebuilt trust within the community and allowed venues to diversify their programming with the confidence that there was an audience for these events.

By handing the programming keys over to community promoters you can:

- Develop and diversify audiences
- Reinstatate trust for your venue within the local community
- Programme a more varied range of work
- Reduce the financial risk on theatre and art events.

Case Study: Darwen Library Theatre

“As venue staff, we all see Darwen as a community venue but Plugged In’s community work has highlighted that our view is not shared by the community. Plugged In have opened doors, facilitated discussion, instilled confidence and inspired people to work together and try something new. They have demonstrated that there is demand for theatre programming and help at hand within the community to promote what is programmed. Simply, Plugged In have reinstated the community within our venue and, with cuts looming, this community is essential to our sustainability.”

- Rebecca Hudson,
- Assistant Promotions Manager, Darwen Library Theatre

This document will lead you through the process of working with community promoters, giving examples of the work done across four venues in Pennine Lancashire and the benefits they have seen.

Clarifying your aims

When setting up a Community Promoters scheme you first need to clarify your aims. Community Promoters can be used in a number of ways; as ambassadors for your venues existing programme; as a focus group; volunteers in front of house; to lend a hand with marketing; or as independent hosts and promoters for their own events. It's important as a venue that you are clear in what you want your promoters to do, before you start recruiting.

You will also want to outline some realistic goals that can be monitored and used as proof for the success of your programme, these might be an increase in audience numbers, footfall within the venue, social media engagement, or number of events programmed. Success won't happen overnight, but community promoters can be financially viable as a long term goal.

What you will need

Setting up and working with Community Promoters takes time and dedication, especially in the early stages. To achieve any kind of success, the programme shouldn't be seen as an easy add on. Below we have outlined some things you will need to work with community promoters. This is based on the model we used at Plugged In, where promoters chose, marketed and hosted their own shows, but will be relevant to you if you want to recruit volunteers or promoters with less responsibility too.

1. Time

Once the scheme had been set up (after recruitment), on average Plugged In staff spent 17 hours a month working with, or on, the Community Promoters scheme in each of their venues. This doesn't include the work done for programming or

marketing. This time was used on organising meetings, setting up extra events and communicating with our community promoters. If you are looking to set up a similar scheme you will need a dedicated staff member for the project with an appropriate amount of hours put aside.

2. Space

You will also need space within your venue's existing programme to accommodate shows chosen by your promoters. In order to let your community promoters and their events feel valued, they should be treated just the same as any event programmed in house at your venue. While it may not always be viable to put a small theatre show on a Friday or Saturday night instead of a big named comedian, it is important to make room in your season for these events and to give them a fair fighting chance. We found that Thursday nights worked well for our venue. Ticket sales could be just as successful on weekdays as they were at weekends when staff and promoters dedicated the extra time and effort to marketing, but you don't want to leave promoters feeling like they are picking up the dregs when it comes to dates.

You'll also need physical space within your venue. Think about which space, if you have multiple, you want your promoters to host events in. For example at King George's Hall in Blackburn, promoters were given the smaller Windsor Suite space to programme as opposed to the much larger main hall. Meaning that accessibility to dates was better, but also giving them ownership of a space and permission to try out new things.

It's also important to think about space to hold your Community Promoter meetings. Groups were much more successful in taking ownership of their venue, if they held their monthly meetings in the same building. You might want to book out a private room for these meetings, or reserve a table in your cafe bar area. If your promoters are really successful you might also want to have a desk space available for them to use when working on shows and events.

3. Communication

When setting up the Plugged In project one of the biggest stumbling blocks was communication between the venues, project staff and our promoters. You'll want to set up clear lines of communication between different departments within your venue, ensuring everyone understands what the Community Promoters scheme is, why it exists and what success will look like. It's important to make sure everyone understands that events programmed by the community are to be treated the same as events programmed in house. Marketing departments should know that these events get the same level of in house marketing as all others, that technical staff

dedicate equal staff hours and that room bookings staff don't see these events as things that can be moved or cancelled without consultation.

Clear communication between the venue and community promoters is, obviously, key. When recruiting and setting up your scheme it is important to be clear about your aims for the project and what it is you want your promoters to do. Having a dedicated member of staff helps in this and community promoters should have contact details for that staff member should they have any concerns or questions.

When organising events or meetings and working with a large group of volunteers you'll want to give as much notice as possible - we found a month to 3 weeks was perfect, with a reminder in the week running up to the event. It's also good practice to take minutes at meetings and share these with the group as soon as possible, especially in the run up to programmed events. This will allow everyone to have a written record of any roles or responsibilities that may have been agreed as well as dates for their diaries.

Finally you will want to keep open communication between the venue, community promoters and any artists booked. If you are curating a menu of work for your promoters to choose from, it is important you make it clear to artists that dates can't be immediately confirmed or if Community Promoters are in direct contact with artists you as the venue will need to know what has been agreed for technical support etc. You may also want to provide feedback to artists that the Community Promoters have given on things such as marketing materials or if they have had a particularly good time after the event.

4. Money

You don't necessarily need a large budget to run a community promoters scheme but you will need to work out how much you are willing to spend.

Allowing Community Promoters to programme and host events means you will have to work out how much budget you want to allow for each show. The original Plugged In project was Arts Council funded, which meant we had a budget for shows and could offer a guarantee against loss on shows, not all venues will have that safety net. It takes time to rebuild audiences and for Community Promoters to gain traction, not all shows will be a sell out, or necessarily make a profit, so it is important to keep this in mind. You might want to start your promoters off with smaller shows.

Other things to consider budgeting for are:

- Volunteer expenses - are you asking volunteers to drive somewhere, will you be funding this etc?

- Refreshments at community meetings
- Budget for extra marketing materials - your promoters might come up with a great way to market an event that will need an extra bit of money thrown at it, or you might find you suddenly need larger print runs now you have extra distribution support. This shouldn't be seen as an expense but an investment in your audience development plan.

5. Open Mindedness

When you open yourselves up to feedback from your local community you might not always like what you hear. It would be easy to respond to every criticism with an answer about why things are the way they are, but it is important to remember that if you want long term positive change then you will at some point have to address these concerns.

Not all changes the community want to see can be made over night, or are even possible, but with open communication you can at least show you are listening and working on making the improvements people want to see.

You will also have to be open minded to trying new things. Community Promoters will surprise you. A show you think they will love may not be what they are looking for and you might hate shows that they suggest. The best way to work with community promoters is to remember that the whole scheme is about testing and changing. You might think their marketing idea will never work, but it is worth giving it a go, you'll either be pleasantly surprised, or the group will know not to try it again in the future.

6. Willing to make changes

Your venue needs to be open to making changes if it wants to work with Community Promoters and really allow them to take ownership of your venue. You need to listen to their feedback and your audience's feedback and be willing to make changes, whether that is in programming, how you run front of house or ticket pricing. Some changes will take time and be long term goals, others may seem impossible but there is nearly always a compromise.

Case Study : Pop Up Box Office

Community Promoters working with King George's Hall in Blackburn wanted to sell tickets from a pop up box office in the centre of town. Originally they were told this wasn't possible because of the ticketing

software used by the venue. However, promoters and box office staff worked together to come up with a solution that pleased everybody. Promoters could take payment for tickets and the customers filled out a form giving all the necessary data required by the box office. Things like accessibility requirements etc. Customers were then given a receipt and the forms and orders were handed into the box office who then posted tickets out to people's homes. This allowed promoters to seal people's interest in a show straight away, rather than putting the onus on people to follow up a leaflet and buy a ticket when they got home.

Finding your promoters

Depending on what you want your community promoters to be will alter how you recruit. What follows are a few examples of the way Community Promoters were recruited for Plugged In in Pennine Lancashire and how we found them.

1. Start at home - Using your existing audiences and people already in your venue

No doubt there will be people already using your venues who have their own thoughts about what they would like to see at your venue. Maybe you know who your regulars are and you can ask them directly or maybe you want to exit flyer all your audiences advertising the opportunity to join your promoters group. This is the best way to start, and as your promoters begin hosting events, and your audiences diversify, they will naturally begin to attract more people to the group.

2. Looking for the movers and shakers

Outside of your venue you will want to start looking for people in the local community who are already known for making change. These 'firestarters' are the type of people invested in the local area and take pride in where they live. Even if they are too busy to join the group themselves they are great for passing on contacts, or acting as a sounding board. Independent shopkeepers, market stall holders, local writers or journalists, if your venue isn't already in contact with these people, then you should be!

Case Study : Independent Shopkeepers in Colne

In Colne, Plugged In worked with independent shopkeeper Ashley, who was known in the area for organising the Colne Food Festival, running for local council and helping the regeneration of Colne high street. Ashley was a very busy guy and while he couldn't commit to regular meetings or hosting events himself, he helped to organise a focus group that The Muni could bounce programming ideas off, distributed leaflets at his events and he encouraged other independent shopkeepers on the high street to support the venue.

3. Working with existing groups

Working with established groups is a great way of attracting new members to your independent group, or alternatively, enabling established groups to host their own one off events. Are there any groups already using your building, or prominent groups within the local area? These don't have to be arts focused groups they could be youth groups or horticulturalists. The upside to working with established groups, is that it takes some of the pressure off venue staff to organise meetings etc. however we found that established groups were less likely to take ownership of the venue and hosted single shows for just the one season.

Case Study : Nelson in Bloom

In Nelson, Plugged In worked with 'Nelson In Bloom' to host 'Morgan & West' a family friendly magic show. Plugged In staff attended the group's usual monthly meetings, where the Plugged In project was part of the group's wider agenda. The group organised group bookings from the local scout groups, advertised the show on their social media and decorated the foyer with daffodils planted in top hats. The show completely sold out and the group used it as an opportunity to promote their own work alongside the venue. However, audiences saw the event as being held by Nelson In Bloom and not part of the venues wider programme. The group also decided that after the show they weren't interested in hosting any more events and decided instead to focus on their own aims.

4. Press and Marketing

Promoting your new Community Scheme via the usual press and marketing is a great way of raising your profile within the local area and highlighting the work you're doing to open up your doors. Social media is another good way of promoting your new scheme, rolling twitter and facebook updates about how people can get in touch or when your next meeting is may attract new younger faces to the group. A dedicated page on your website that introduces the project to people, as well as hosting some resources and information for existing promoters is a good idea. This larger 'splatter gun' marketing is good not only for attracting people to your group, but for planting the seed in potential audiences minds that something exciting is happening at your venue.

Running the scheme

Once you have clarified your aims for your Community Promoters and recruited them you will have to work out the logistics of actually running the scheme. Below is a case study of the successful model that is now running in Darwen, how it came about and how they run the scheme. We also suggest you look at the Plugged In handbook for promoters, which talks them through their side of the project.

Case Study : The Darwen Model

Darwen Library Theatre was the first venue that set up its own independent group of Community Promoters (as opposed to established groups working with the venue). We recruited our promoters in a variety of ways:

- We contacted local groups who had an invested interest in making a change to the local area, mainly the Friends of Darwen Library group who met in the library directly above the theatre.
- We worked alongside other arts projects in the area to attract people who were interested in visual arts, crafts and writing to try their hand at something new.
- We used local contacts within the venue to speak directly to people who we thought would be interested in the project
- We advertised within our venue and staff spoke directly to existing audiences about the project at our events.

From this we picked up one or two people from each area, they were introduced to the dedicated staff member individually before we set up regular monthly meetings at the theatre and invited them all along to meet one another.

We introduced them softly to the project. At first group meetings were more general about the arts, what people liked and what the group felt was missing from the local area. This gave the programmer the chance to get to know the group and their tastes and curate a menu of work for them to choose from.

The menu was put together from a number of artists who agreed to pencil in dates with the programmer and these dates were also held at the venue to ensure the promoters could host the show they wanted easily, without having to go back and forth, or cause any disappointment. We felt it was particularly important at the early stage of the project that we could deliver what we were promising.

The menu of work was presented to the group in March/April time, so that they could choose work to host in the Autumn season. While this initially seemed like a long run in to the group, it gave them an insight to the programming schedule of the venue and was necessary for them to be able to secure dates with artists. From the menu the group chose two shows to be hosted in October and November.

In the run up to the Autumn, monthly meetings continued with the group, to build up their confidence in talking about the shows and to get them to slowly begin thinking about the marketing of the venue. We also had a number of incentives to keep the group interested and invested in the project. We sent them on 'Go & See' trips to see productions at other local venues. This not only kept their interest but exposed them to a wider range of work (especially those who were not avid theatre goers) and got them thinking about changes they might want to make to other areas of the venue, in particular front of house. We also sent a small group of them up to the Edinburgh Festival, to look out for work that they might programme in future seasons, again giving them a taste of what else there was to offer, building their confidence when discussing work and also keeping them thinking about the long term goals of the project.

As their events grew closer, meetings became more regular and the group began to plan out their marketing campaign. The group were keen to work with the local market stall holders to promote their shows, seeing them as key members of local life. For 'Instructions for American Servicemen in Britain' a theatre comedy show set in the 1940s, the group

hosted a jazz band in the market hall. Hiring a band was more expensive than we would normally invest in our marketing for one event, but we had the budget put aside and decided it was a fitting way to announce 'something is happening here.'

The day was a huge success, people responded well to the fact that it was local people talking to them about the upcoming events - across the venue, not just 'American Servicemen.' All of our leaflets for the event were distributed plus extra we had printed! We collected email addresses for the venues mailing list and established a good relationship with the market management and stall holders. Best of all we saw ticket sales double over the weekend following on from the event.

For the second event 'The Whispering Road' a folk music and storytelling event, the group wanted to set up a 'Troll Trail' around Darwen which families could enter. We were initially cautious of this idea, as we thought it would become something extra to market rather than a tool for marketing in itself. However we tried it out, and while entrants to the trail were small, the trolls, which were placed in shop windows and popular areas in Darwen, were great for getting people talking and for getting access to places we wouldn't normally have posters.

On the evenings of their events the group worked alongside venue staff and volunteers to host the shows. They implemented changes to the front of house that they had picked up from their visits to other venues. They welcomed people on the door, which helped anyone who was new to the building navigate their way around. They spoke to audience members in the interval about the show and what they would like to see in the future, so as to inform their future programming decisions. At the end of the show they collected feedback forms and contact details and when it came to the next Community Promoters meetings, we found our numbers doubled.

The Community Promoters scheme did require a budget to get started and we didn't see immediate financial success, however the Promoters second event did make a profit and their most recent show 'Showstopper! The Improvised Musical!' which was much bigger and riskier than their previous programming, was just shy of making the £2000 fee. We are still in the very early days of the scheme, but now that the extra Arts Council funding has come to an end, the venue is keen to carry on running the promoters scheme inhouse. This may mean that we have to work with smaller marketing budgets in the future, but we are confident that the promoters themselves are the key to successful arts programming in Darwen and not the ability to throw money at it.

Things that you can take away from this when running your own scheme:

- Recruiting from several different areas in order to reach a wide range of people
- Introducing promoters to the scheme 'softly' and getting to know them before beginning to programme
- Working to your normal programming schedule and handling artists appropriately
- Keeping promoters interested and invested with a range of incentives
- Building promoters confidence with extra training and events
- Putting aside a marketing budget and seeing it as part of your larger audience development plan
- Building good relationships with other projects, groups and 'movers and shakers' in the area
- Willingness to try new ideas and learning from their successes and failures
- Implementing change in other areas of the venue
- Seeing the scheme as a long term strategic plan and not just a 'quick fix'

Other things to consider

The Plugged In project worked over 18 months in Pennine Lancashire. In this time they had the ability to trial and test many different things in the name of audience development and these are some things you may want to consider doing alongside your Community Promoters scheme.

1. Creating partnerships outside your venue - using libraries to host workshops, working with youth organisations and building relationships with schools for leaflet distribution
2. Joining in with other projects and schemes running nationally for example signing up to the Family Arts Festival and The Big Draw Campaign
3. Partnering with other local art projects to host events and diversify audiences across the local area
4. Offering Arts Awards to local young people as an introduction to the arts and becoming youth promoters
5. Hosting large free events such as Storytelling Festivals and experimenting with how the venues are used
6. Hosting events outside of the venues to raise their profile within the local community.

You can find out more about what the Plugged In project did by looking at the blog kept through out phase one on itspluggedin.com

Further Resources

A number of other resources are available to download from the [Plugged In website](#) including:

- [‘Get Plugged In to Your Local Venue’](#)

This was a guide produced to help guide our community promoters through the Plugged In project. It will also be useful for venues to be able to see the project from a community promoters point of view.

- [FAQ's for Performers and Artists](#)

Programming with Community Promoters is much less straightforward than your usual in house programming process, not just for you but for the artists you are working with too. We produced a FAQ sheet to help companies understand the project, but it will also be helpful for venues when thinking about how they want to manage that process.

- [Plugged In Artists Information Sheet](#)

When selecting Artists for our programming menu, we asked them to fill out this information sheet before hand. Things asked for were based on what our Promoters and our audiences wanted to know before picking a show.

- [‘Plugged In so far...’](#)

This document was produced as part of our final Arts Council Evaluation and is a succinct look at the work and successes of the Plugged In project and how it helped develop audiences in Pennine Lancashire.

- [Report on ‘Back of the Bus’](#)

Back of the Bus was one of the biggest projects Plugged In undertook, this report looks at what can be learnt from working on such a project, how our audiences developed and responded to the show and the partnership process between arts projects and private business.

Useful Blog Posts

We kept a blog throughout the project, below are a handful of posts you may find particularly useful as case studies for the work done. You can still access the full blog from the project on [the Plugged In website](#).

- [Why a Conversation Can be More Important than a Leaflet](#)
- [Some statistics from our Autumn 2015 season...](#)
- [Preparation for 'Instructions for American Servicemen in Britain'](#)
- [Our Storytelling Festivals](#)