

Survive and Thrive Case Study

Nottinghamshire Heritage Forum Adopting a Constitution



Aim: Following a diagnostic interview and a legal review, it was agreed that the organisation needed support in conducting an operational review and forward planning. The following four aims were identified and agreed for the forum's participation in Survive & Thrive (S&T):

- *Forward planning - to take account of the changing circumstances of the Museums Development Officer network, and of Renaissance East Midlands*
- *Learning from others forums to share experience and knowledge*
- *Legal and governance support on considering options for the future structure and role of the forum*
- *Training and development for forum members to develop skills in relation to the function and management of the forum.*

Background

At the start of its involvement with S&T, the forum was a loose association of like-minded museum professionals and volunteers. The forum was well organised and articulate, and represented many of its constituent museums across the county. However, the executive group had already identified that the forum did not have sufficient influence politically, or capacity to grow without making some structural and/or legal changes. This was compounded by the fact that the Museums Development Officer (MDO) network was about to change, and the ongoing support in running the forum from the MDO in Nottinghamshire was about to be withdrawn.

Method

Members of the executive group and the Nottinghamshire MDO attended the S&T Forums Day, where all the forums in the East Midlands attended and discussed their current status, and options for the future. All the forums were encouraged to share their successes and challenges, and to consider different approaches for how to take the forums onto the next stage of growth. Nottinghamshire Forum decided to explore their options in more depth, and host a day led by Arts & Business for all its members to consider its future role, its stakeholders and its own management.

As a result of this careful consideration of options and purpose, the forum agreed to constitute formally as an unincorporated association, and used as a starting point the constitution adopted by the Lincolnshire Heritage Forum, which was felt to be the best example by the S&T team. The forum also formally agreed its administration and management structures, which were crucial to get right in a voluntary-led organisation with limited resources.

One significant aspect of the forum's deliberations was how to develop its capacity to fundraise directly, given the tightening of public and private sector budgets. In order to explore how this might be achieved without compromising the liabilities of individual forum members, the forum asked Arts & Business to produce a template for future partnership fundraising agreements. This document was debated again by the whole forum, and adopted as a new tool in the future operations of the forum.

Fundamentally, the forum has moved from an articulate but loose network, into a legally constituted organisation with a sense of purpose, clarity of direction, and a plan for its future development. Although the executive group had already identified the need for change, the S&T programme provided the catalyst for action and offered the professional advice which may otherwise have been out of the financial reach of the forum.

Evaluation and Outcomes

The Nottinghamshire Heritage Forum now has a legal structure, designated executive positions and roles, and a better understanding of what the forum can deliver to its members, and what the needs of the sector are. The forum has also looked outside of its membership to consider political and funding changes, and see how the forum can fill an important role as it develops. It has undertaken practical considerations around its own fundraising, and has used S&T to help prepare for this work in producing the template agreement. It has introduced member annual subscriptions to help stabilise its finances, and is seeking partnerships with external agencies to spread the cost of marketing and promotion.

The most crucial outcome is that the forum now has the structure and knowledge to manage itself, and to become an advocate for its members, and the heritage sector in Nottinghamshire.

"Participating in the Survive and Thrive programme has given a clear focus and structure to this phase of our development, with opportunities to learn from similar groups in neighbouring counties and to draw on professional expertise as we needed it. This combination of support has helped us to put in place the structures that will support our future ambitions and to move forward quickly and with confidence." Bev Baker, Chair, Nottinghamshire Heritage Forum

Conclusion and Legacy

Conclusion:

The forum's discussions about changing and modernising are not finished. There is still work to be done on clarifying the forum's advocacy messages and the various audiences for this advocacy. With its many members bringing different perspectives, the forum will continue to refine its services. However, the forum has made enormous progress throughout its involvement with the S&T programme, and continues to approach change in an intelligent way.

Legacy:

One of the positive additional outcomes from the forum's involvement in S&T has been its increasing contact with heritage forums across the East Midlands. The mutual benefit and political strength that may come from the East Midlands having strong forums in every county is significant. Equally, representation within the county can now be expanded to ensure a strong voice for the whole of the sector and a place at the political table to argue for the importance of museums and heritage in society. Nottinghamshire Heritage Forum is set to play a crucial part in this next chapter of heritage participation and growth.

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