

## **Explore York Libraries and Archives**

### **Report against contract April 2023- March 2024**

Explore is a different kind of public service: a mutual owned by our staff and our community members. We are dedicated to enhancing lives in York in our trusted spaces; providing library, archive, learning, and creative activities; reflecting and developing a lively, inclusive community. We offer opportunities for people to read, meet, learn, imagine, create and belong.

Explore receives almost two thirds of its income through its contract with City of York Council and the remainder we need to raise through trading, grants and other fundraising, last year our income totalled £4.02m. The cost of running Explore in 2023-24 was £4.01m

This report is structured round the core offers as detailed in the contract specification with City of York Council and is based on delivery in the 2023-24 financial year.

### **Overview of Year In Numbers**

- 821,837 Physical library visits
- 1,081,491 physical and e-library issues
- 45,657 PC sessions
- 3,134 public events attended by 46,90 people
- 97,847 self and staff mediated engagement with the Archives
- 436, 712 website visits
- 596, 050 impressions on social media and 12,351 engagements
- 20,943 volunteer hours donated

The numbers of above demonstrate how much Explore York Libraries and Archives is built into the fabric of the communities it supports. Our overall trend is one of growth on the previous year and that despite continued financial pressures and increased costs which impact on our ability to do more of the things we know our customers love.

This was Explore's first year as an Arts Council National Portfolio organisation and it has been great to see the activity, mainly focussed on Tang Hall, that we have been able to do because of this funding.

This year our Archives team have focussed on building the framework to launch our Setting the Record Straight project. The project implements a comprehensive review of our collection's information, provides further preventative conservation measures on selected items; creates generous online information about our collections,

providing contextual details and will support and signpost researchers to related material.

### **Reading**

Explore champions the values of libraries to support reading and offer inspiring reading choices.

The Summer Reading Challenge is our key programme for children and families, the theme for the Summer Reading Challenge 2023 was Ready, Set, Read! Delivered in partnership with Youth Sport Trust, Ready, Set, Read! To encourage children to participate in the Summer Reading Challenge over the summer holidays we delivered over 100 events and activities for children and their families across our libraries, including Hungate Reading Café and the Community Stadium.

The below statistics demonstrate the scale of this programme but also the success in relation to encouraging children to continue to read over the summer holidays.

- 3142 children signed up Ready, Set, Read! (2998 in 2022)
- 1709 (55%) completed the Challenge (1617 in 2022)
- 301 children joined the library so they could take part in the Challenge.
- 70,409 physical books and 3516 e-books/e-audio were issued to children over the period of the Challenge.
- 57 Summer Reading Challenge Volunteers volunteered a total of 475 hours.

Explore funds most of the Summer Reading Challenge activities through external grants and partnerships.

In addition to the SRC Explore continues to support the development of young people and children through a multitude of other activities including the Bloodaxe Reading Challenge which saw an increase increase in both starters and completers this year, with 348 starting and 204 completing the challenge. With 114 children and their parents attended the celebratory event with author Louie Stowell.

We believe in working in partnership with others in the City to ensure that our families have access to the broadest range of information, advice and guidance as policy. By way of example our Look Say Sing Play (LSSP) sessions at Acomb, York and Tang Hall Explore Centres are supported by a CYC Childcare Worker who has been invaluable ensuring the wider message around CYC Early Years values and service is communicated to as many people as possible.

For our adult readers we provide "Finding the Words" a monthly on-line poetry performance, which continues to be popular, especially with those who find difficulty in accessing an in-person event. We host events as part of York Literature Festival

and support 75 different reading groups. Reading groups are an increasingly important way for adults to connect and share their joy of reading with 11 new groups starting this year.

### **Information**

Our skilled information professional staff support customers to access trusted information every day.

Three major new initiatives were launched during the year cementing our role as trusted, safe, welcoming spaces within communities.

1. The Government-backed family hub delivery model in libraries went live as a pilot initiative on 6<sup>th</sup> November, with Explore Centres supporting enquiries from within the community with expert support provided once a week by a trained specialist Family Navigator from within City of York Council. The family navigator sessions and all scheduled at peak visitor times and mapped to storytime activity. The pilot ends in April, where the success of the impact on the family hub model and its delivery through libraries will be assessed and decision made with regards its sustainability.
2. Following a successful programme of staff training, the Explore Centres at Acomb, Tang Hall and York are now registered as Hate Crime Reporting Centres and are advertised as such on various websites. Anyone suffering a hate crime can walk in and report the crime, with support from staff.
3. The mobile library was utilised in partnership with York CAB and City of York Council to provide targeted support to communities at street level within Tang Hall to help people access benefits and other financial support. The service operates once a fortnight.

Throughout the year we continued to support council initiatives, providing the community with access and support in accessing key City-wide consultations, including the high profile and wide-ranging City of York Council Local Transport Strategy Consultation. Our support in helping communities access key information online continues, with all libraries providing one to one digital support to access fuel payments etc, including supporting 28 customers access the Household Support fund

### **Digital**

We continue to help people to access services on-line such as completing forms and printing documents. We deliver regular weekly digital support sessions at Explore Centres. We focused activity during Get On-line Week in October and Safer Internet

Day in February. In addition, our public PCs were booked out for 45,657 sessions during the year, an increase of 3791 sessions on the previous year.

### **Health and Social Care**

We continue to run our very popular weekly Adults' events that support community connection, reducing social isolation and improving wellbeing including knit and natter, Boccia, scrabble, chess and adult Lego sessions.

In addition our additional Art Council funding as enabled us to deliver:

"Creative Café" sessions at Tang Hall Explore. These involve artists who are experienced in participatory, co-creation working with a group of Tang Hall residents who come together over 8 sessions to create artwork telling the story of the history of Tang Hall inspired by and using images from the Archives. The final work was celebrated at an exhibition in March.

"Archive through the lens of Disability Arts" - disabled artist Stephen Lee Hodgkins, and representatives from York People First shared their archive research including an easy read document at a public event attended by disabled artists, researchers, disability groups, Explore staff and members of the public. The event was held for York Disability Week 2023 and had 30 plus attendees.

To support *Children's Mental Health Awareness Week* in February we hosted Creativity Starts Here, a confidence building art class for Teens at Tang Hall Explore. Providing an opportunity to express their feelings through their art.

### **Learning & Skills**

We host York Learning in our Explore Centres and signpost to formal learning as a progression routes. Explore contributes to the citywide Community Learning Partnership. Our programme of events support life-long and inter-generational learning. Through our work with partner organisations we showcase opportunities. Examples include *Multiply* focused on adults with no maths qualification; *Make a Difference* providing adult careers advice.

Our programme of exhibitions which are also delivered as part of our NPO activity plan include thought-provoking content as illustrated by the following examples curated in partnership with Festival of Ideas in June with the theme Rediscover, Reimagine, Rebuild.

*Hidden Treasures: an exhibition by Navigators Art & Performance at York Explore*  
Curated by Navigators Arts & Performance for York Festival of Ideas 2023

This new exhibition was inspired by rarely seen works in York Art Gallery, books in York Explore, intriguing aspects of York life and culture that people might not notice in their day-to-day lives or may not be aware of at all.

*Photography in Yorkshire in the 1990's Exhibition and talk at Hungate Café.*

Historian Theo Gordon in conversation with photographer Sunil Gupta, whose work helps to historicise recent interest in decolonisation and queer representation. Sunil talked about his work in Yorkshire in the 1990s, curating the landmark AIDS activist exhibition 'Ecstatic Antibodies: Resisting the AIDS Mythology' at Impressions Gallery, York, and reflected on his time working at the University of Hull.

### **Culture**

We continue to challenge imaginations through our programme of culture and creativity. As an NPO we will focus on culture and creativity in the heart of our communities.

Year 1 NPO activity at Tang Hall Explore:

*York Dance Space: Brick by Brick Step by Step* a collaboration with Tang Hall Past and Present, local schools, and community groups. This dance and music theatre piece is a celebration of 100 years of Tang Hall social estate telling the stories of people and place. The rich findings from Explore Archive provided the source of inspiration. A final performance is scheduled for April in the main hall at Burnholme.

*History Misbehaves:* An audio drama based on a series of monologues dramatizing how Tang hall history has misbehaved! The drama was co-created with performers from the Tang Hall community, writer Paul Birch and director Kate Valentine (Digital Drama). The audio drama will be shared at a live event at Tang Hall Explore at the Centre at Burnholme in April. The drama will also be featured on local radio and will be available on all pod cast platforms.

School holiday activity programme: We were able to provide a vibrant holiday activity programme for children and families through funding from for example York Children's Trust and our work with parts such as NRM and NDB1. By participating in the HAF (Holiday Activity and Food) programme we were able to include focused activities aimed disadvantages families. Activities ranged from theatre productions, Bollywood dancing workshops to comic book art workshop, circus skills workshop, Stop Frame Animation sessions and Shakespeare spooky stories!

Working in partnership: working with partners added to our programme of activities examples include York Literature Festival, Festival of Ideas, Aesthetica Film Festival and National Centre for Early Music with Baroque around the Books.

## **Archive and Local History Provision:**

During 2023/24, the archives team made it a priority to begin addressing the serious legacy issues preventing staff and users from accessing the collections. Key tasks have included:

- Identifying and highlighting the serious legacy issues relating to the management of the archive's collections
- Developing a methodology and associated workflows that will begin to address these issues
- Assessing the impact of the issues on our status as an accredited service
- Opening a dialogue with The National Archives Accreditation Panel
- Identifying ways in which the service can address these problems without jeopardising its standing as an accredited service

Under the guidance of an experienced archives consultant, the team have achieved the following:

- Developed and submitted the Archive Service Status Report to key stakeholders
- Met with The National Archives and secured an extension to our accreditation submission. The new deadline for our submission is November 2025. The panel have also requested an interim update be sent no later than 20 October 2024.
- Developed a Prioritisation Matrix and Remedial Cataloguing workflows to guide and document the work to address legacy issues
- Created staff capacity for this work by closing the Reading Room for 3 days per month from April 2024
- Packaged and communicated this work under the title: [Setting the Record Straight](#)
- Formulated a new suite of KPIs to report on this work to internal and external stakeholders

This year the service took a major step towards improving collections care, with a subscription to The National Conservation Service (NCS). This subscription will provide much needed professional conservation services and advice for the team. The collections have some significant conservation challenges, including the presence of mould (from being stored historically in poor conditions), and undocumented cellulose nitrate and acetate negative film. Supported by the Director of NCS, the archivists have completed a detailed benchmarking exercise, which identifies areas for improvement and will inform forward planning.

We are working closely with CYC to understand the challenges in ensuring timely transfer of records to the Archives. We are both concerned that the level of transfers are currently below what we would expect them to be

The project with CYC to implement Preservica has reached some key milestones, although it should be noted that there remain risks to delivery of the programme. Key achievements are:

- Installation of digital processing PC and associated ingest software
- Creation and testing of ingest procedures with a local community group
- Automation of transfer of Mod Gov minutes, pilot
- Creation of Explore's Digital Preservation Policy and Strategy
- Creation and adoption of new gift agreement covering digital material

In addition Explore Archives continues to demonstrate an exceptional commitment to access and engagement. In November, the archives service recruited a new team member, Archivist (Access, Inclusion and Engagement). This role supports Explore's NPO programme, our outreach work across our communities, and improvements in Equality, Diversity and Inclusion for archives users and archives staff.

In addition, the Archives have seen a significant increase in both archive researchers and document retrievals in comparison to 2022/23. This is against a national picture of decline with regards to in-person visits. Explore Archives has worked with a broad variety of location organisation and community groups over the year including Heritage Hunters (in partnership with York Museums Trust), Roman York (in partnership with the York Archaeological Trust), York People First, York Unlocked and many of the local history groups across York.

We have worked with 8 education groups providing 13 different sessions on topics as varied as Buildings History, Fashion, Medieval History, the Wars of the Roses and Crime and Punishment. In addition we have provided placements for students from both York St John and University of York.

### **Looking Ahead**

Explore continues to deliver an exceptional service for the residents of York, 2024-25 includes the second year of delivery under our NPO programme, the opening of the new Clifton Explore Library along with celebrations linked to our 10<sup>th</sup> year as Explore York Libraries and Archives.