

# LONDON VOICES

## YEAR ONE

### SUMMARY EVALUATION



“Anything in life that occurs, occurs through dialogue  
and not through monologue.”

Peter Sellars, *The question of culture*

## LONDON VOICES

### What is it?

London Voices is a capacity building project for family learning within the National Trust. It comprises

**Creative projects at four London properties:**

Ham House, Morden Hall Park, Osterley Park and House, and Sutton House.

**Training for staff and volunteers**

**Cultural Research at each property**

**Diversifying volunteers**

**The development of new interpretation**

Funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund, its ambition is to open up a meaningful dialogue between the four properties and families from within their local communities, in particular families who would not normally visit. This dialogue is intended to lead to a greater understanding of the barriers that can prevent people from accessing the properties and what they offer, and lead to new resources, and tools for working with families, within these sites, and across the National Trust.

In Year One creative projects lasting between 4 and 7 weeks, with visits alternating between the property and its partner school, Led by an experienced artist these used storytelling and craft as the primary creative vehicles. Sessions were fully supported by school staff, property staff and the London Voices team. The projects themselves were prepared over a period of several months; working parties met regularly, and continue to meet now. A second artist or artists, and the London Voices team then developed new pieces of temporary interpretive materials for each property, drawing on the ideas of the participating families. Training was provided for staff and volunteers to introduce them to the project, and to explore interpretation, new audiences and family learning.

The Cultural research at each property provided the opportunity to expand the current understanding of the four properties by placing them in a world context.

Research, carried out by a lead researcher and by volunteers, explored aspects of the stories of the properties in the context of national and global movements, and revealing contemporary relevance.

## **Who is it for?**

The participating families were targeted through partnerships with local Primary schools, and in discussion with other local partners, in particular local Borough initiatives for lifelong learning and social inclusion. Partnerships are expected to last for the three years, with a strong emphasis on the building up of sustainable relationships.

For the National Trust in general, and these four properties in particular, the projects constitute an opportunity for a vital piece of action research. There is a perceived gap in understanding in the ways in which the Trust interprets the meaning of heritage in a multi-cultural Britain, and its own potential for playing a part in exploring heritage with its local communities. The Trust is committed to taking on the learning from these projects, and to supporting the project with full involvement from relevant staff, and training for staff and volunteers.

## **Why now?**

Developments in The Museums and Heritage sector, in Education, and in The National Trust itself, make this an important moment to undertake a piece of work that can help the Trust move towards a more inclusive and accessible way of working, and re-examine its own valuable resources. The movement for change within the Trust is not new, and London Voices builds on a history of participatory arts work, including the HLF funded 'Untold Story', which worked nationally across 18 National Trust sites, using the performing arts to reinterpret the properties, the West Midlands HLF funded 'Whose Story?' a cultural interpretation project, the Arts Council funded audience development project,

'London Links', the award winning community involvement project at Sutton House, and the 'Lights of Asia' research project at Osterley Park.

Developments in associated fields of work also mean that there is fertile territory; schools looking for ways to develop family learning and deliver extended day services, an increasing field of artists skilled in participatory work and reflexive practice, and a real demand to re-examine the notion of heritage, by recognising the life experiences and opinions of the participants who might once have been expected only to receive information.

## **KEY FINDINGS FROM YEAR 1**

The first year of London Voices has created a strong foundation for the future, and has generated important learning. All four creative projects were successfully achieved, and the temporary interpretation created. Four training days took place, involving staff and volunteers from all four properties, and the cultural research, also involving volunteers, has now been written up, and will provide a useful resource both for London Voices and for the properties and the Trust in a wider sense. The successes of Year One are revealed in four key aspects of the work:

### **1. SIZE OF GROUPS IN THE CREATIVE PROJECTS**

Working with small, carefully chosen groups at each property, engaging with them, and identifying the learning, has created a strong foundation of knowledge and experience. Through the detail of these projects learning arises for the whole family learning sector in National Trust Properties. There has been active involvement from property staff, which both contributes to a change in attitude towards the properties from the

families, but also allows staff direct experiences of learning from the families.

## 2. DIALOGUE AND CONSULTATION

The work has been marked by dialogue with participants, partners, staff and volunteers. The building of relationships has been a priority, and considerable attention was given to the preparation. Value was given to contributions and suggestions from people of all ages. The creative projects used appropriate participatory arts techniques.

## 3. RECOGNITION OF THE PLACE OF THE PROPERTY IN THE LOCAL COMMUNITY

The partnerships with local schools have been explored beyond the project, with attendance at assemblies and parents' evenings, and efforts made to include the wider school and families where possible. Property staff have been visibly active outside the properties. Partnerships with Borough initiatives have contributed to the sustainability of the project, and links with local colleges, to offer volunteering opportunities and placements, have been seen to be mutually beneficial.

## 4. BROADENING THE POTENTIAL OF THE CREATIVE PROJECTS THROUGH TRAINING AND CULTURAL RESEARCH

In addition to the creative projects, the development of new volunteer placements, the training programme and the cultural research help to create increased potential for the success of family learning, and increased capacity for the properties. They both constitute long-term investment. Work with volunteers is crucial to the success of future initiatives, as well as the dissemination of the learning across property and regional staff.

## DURING YEAR ONE

**897** adults and **2624** children were involved in some way

**91** people participated in the creative projects

Of the 91 people who participated in projects

29% were 0-5 s

6-23% were 6-8s

8% were 9-11

40% were over 18

(There were no participants between 11 and 18)

A total of **120** staff and volunteers participated in the training programme

**32** new volunteers were recruited

**73** volunteers participated overall

## Recommendations for the National Trust as an organisation

Our evaluation shows a high level of success in Year One, and we fully support the intention to continue the programme of creative projects, the partnerships with local schools and relevant organisations, and the supporting programme of training.

London Voices has also highlighted some challenges for the National Trust as an organisation. In order to maximise the benefits of the learning from the project, and ensure long-term impact, we recommend in years two and three:

- Official recognition of outreach work within the properties. Outreach has been an essential part of this project. There needs to be a way of recording and recognising work done outside the properties in order to give it full value. (Properties do not receive an Education Group membership credit for outreach work)
- The cost of a visit needs to be addressed as a significant barrier. The majority of the families participating in London Voices would not be able to afford a single visit or National Trust membership. Suggestions for ameliorating this include, a local membership scheme, a London wide membership scheme that costs less than National membership, a temporary London Voices scheme where visits outside sessions can be monitored.
- This issue has particular significance at the present time, when the Year One projects have ended, and the Year two projects are in preparation. How can properties keep people interested and involved?
- Understanding of the National Trust. In an informal survey we asked ten adults from different families involved in London Voices if they knew that the National Trust was a Charity. Only one person knew this, and one responded, "It doesn't look like a Charity". The National Trust may need to find new ways of communicating its core message to families who only see it as a successful business, and are not aware of its history or mission.
- Volunteers are key to the future of family learning within the Trust, and investment in them needs to be made. At the same time more flexible

- arrangements for volunteering may mean that a more diverse volunteer force is recruited, and that this contributes in itself to a shift in attitude.
- Contact with the local community, and with families is sometimes seen as the remit of only the Education staff. What we have seen in London Voices in Year One, is that other staff involvement was hugely beneficial on both sides. This needs to be progressed in Years 2 and 3.
  - At the end of Year One, property staff are already beginning to look ahead to the end of London Voices funding in 2009. While London Voices will continue to generate learning, and a huge amount of enjoyment on all sides, the national organisation needs to be considering what learning for all at the heart of its mission is going to look like, and how it will be supported

### Issues that need to be addressed in order to support the integration of the London Voices approach more widely include

- Making a business case for addressing the financial barriers to entry for many local families
- Disseminating the learning across whole staff groups and volunteer teams
- Property capacity for maintaining partnerships and local links, particularly in between the creative projects.
- An acceptance of the value of participatory involvement with local communities at national level