

## SO FESTIVAL

|||||

Operated by Magna Vitae Trust for Leisure & Culture, SO Festival is an innovative, free, annual, international outdoor arts festival that brings high quality culture from across Europe to audiences of all ages, on the Lincolnshire coast.

NOVEMBER 2022



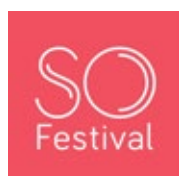
This document has been produced for online viewing, please consider the environment before printing.



**Operated by Magna Vitae Trust for Leisure & Culture, SO Festival** is an innovative, free, annual, international outdoor arts festival that brings high quality culture from across Europe to audiences of all ages, on the Lincolnshire coast. Recently awarded Arts Council England funding and securing prestigious National Portfolio Organisation (NPO) status for the third time, SO Festival is at the forefront of developing a new approach to culture in the UK, positioning artists and young people at its heart.

All images: Jake Lewis Photography

This best practice guide has been commissioned as a series as part of the "Coastal Sustainability through careers and business skills in Greater Lincolnshire" Coastal Communities Fund project.





# SETTING THE SCENE

Launched in 2009 by East Lindsey District Council, in partnership with Arts Council England, SO aimed to interact with audiences that would not normally engage with arts and culture. The three-day summer festival successfully incorporated elements of street theatre around Skegness, culminating in a performance on the beach.

Over the years, the event developed and grew to a somewhat unsustainable size, incorporating not just coastal, but market towns, spread across nine days. At its peak in 2012, during the London 2012 Olympic Games, SO Festival was jointly promoted with several national events, including an expanded torch relay called 'Follow the Light.'

From here, the festival began to look at international expansion and how it could benefit from existing partnerships with towns in Sweden and Denmark conceived through a Creative Europe project in 2009. SO Festival started its international development journey through its programme, its staffing and opportunities for local artists.

When the Magna Vitae Trust for Leisure & Culture was formed in 2015, it took on the National Portfolio Organisation (NPO) for SO Festival. At the same time, Europe's leading festival director, Jens Frimann Hansen was appointed Artistic Director and brought with him partnerships with Helsingør Teater in Denmark and PASSAGE Festival in Denmark and Sweden. The festival would go on to introduce international elements, but with much deeper community routes, linking in with schools and colleges to encourage local young people to work or volunteer at the event.

Recently awarded Arts Council England funding and securing National Portfolio Organisation status for the third time, SO Festival is pushing forward with its ambition to position local young people at the heart of its operation, providing a gateway to a career in the arts and culture sector, as well as enriching the wider community.

# APPROACH

## IDENTIFYING THE NEED FOR SKILLS AND TRAINING

During the initial years, SO Festival became acutely aware and frustrated by its reliance on expertise from outside the area. Identifying this priority to invest in the local population and businesses, the organisation embarked on a plan to work with schools and colleges to upskill young people and offer them opportunities for employment, apprenticeships and volunteering. In developing a strong relationship with education providers, SO Festival has been able to influence course content ensuring that skills and training match its requirements.

*“At the last festival, approximately 70% of roles were filled by local people”*

## ACCESSIBLE ROUTE TO EMPLOYMENT

SO Festival successfully promotes a route to employment that sees individuals return year-on-year. People can engage with the festival on different levels and upskill accordingly, an approach that enables those who might start as volunteers to progress to work seasonally, become an artist, or part of the production team in a full-time role.

*“Individuals see that they can access training and development for this event and we actively work with them to become part of the SO Festival family”*

## ESTABLISHING PROGRAMMING HUBS

Building on its desire to include the local community wherever possible, the organisation has established programming hubs which educate participants on how to choose and design content for an event, with the help and support of experts from SO Festival. The aspiration of these hubs is to create performances within Lincolnshire that are initially hosted locally, but if developed to festival standard, have the potential to be showcased at SO festival and traded with Scandinavia. Ultimately, this not only gives artists the opportunity to perform internationally and benefit from an economically advantageous circuit but also delivers economies of scale for SO Festival as performers are booked for multiple events in the UK and Europe. Early indications from the hubs suggest that participants are aged between 35 – 60 years old.

*“These hubs are open to anyone within the community who wants to upskill and learn how to programme within their individual events”*





### **A FRIENDLY AND TRANSPARENT ORGANISATION**

The organisation credits its success with recruitment and retention to its friendly and transparent culture, an approach which begins with its Artistic Director who is accessible and generous with his and his team's time. SO Festival's willingness to engage with community groups who want to upskill and develop their programme, creates a supportive partnership which benefits the organisation and the community at large.

### **DEVELOPING YOUNG PEOPLE**

With a strong ambition to engage young people, SO Festival is developing education, exchange and volunteering opportunities that will grow the capacity of the local arts and culture sector significantly. Working closely with its European partners, the organisation is adopting the Scandinavian approach to culture, which positions the sector as an opportunity to enrich people's lives, making them happier and healthier, as well as providing the necessary skills for employment.

*"We want to give young people work that develops their skills, friendships and perceptions"*



### **THE UK'S FIRST SCANDINAVIAN-STYLE CULTURE HOUSE**

Utilising the Embassy Theatre building in Skegness, SO Festival is embarking on a ground-breaking project to establish the UK's first Scandinavian-style Culture House, a community-based, social value theatre. Having already secured £1.4 million from the government's Towns Fund, the organisation is currently submitting a further bid for support from the Cultural Development Fund. Rooted in its long-standing relationship with Sweden and Denmark, SO Festival is passionate about delivering this new approach to theatre in the UK and demonstrating that culture can change people's lives, making them happier and healthier.

*"We want to supercharge volunteering, education, skills and training opportunities, as well as elevate the profile of Skegness"*

### **MEASURING SUCCESS**

Currently, the organisation generates its own evaluation surveying audiences for views on performances, presentation of the space, enjoyment level, how the festival made them feel and where they live. Artists and those working on the event are asked where they travelled from to take part and for feedback on their enjoyment, any areas for improvement or future employment opportunities. Having secured additional funding, SO Festival will soon be engaging an independent evaluation company to develop and deliver a robust evaluation framework.



# RESULTS

- 40,000 visitors to the festival in 2022
- Currently employs up to 6 members of staff year-round, increasing to 100 – 150 at festival time
- 70% of SO Festival staff return year-on-year to work on the event
- Recently secured prestigious National Portfolio Organisation (NPO) status for the third time running and Arts Council England funding
- Secured £1.4 million in funding to date to build the UK's first Scandinavian-style Culture House
- Proud to be a case study shared with the French, Belgian, German, Danish, Swedish and Dutch embassies to demonstrate a different approach to working with artists and young people post Creative Europe
- Up to 100 individuals per week from the arts and culture community engaged with others via 'The Social,' an online meeting established by SO Festival during COVID
- UK Festival Awards 2022 nominee for 'Best Small Festival', 'Best Family Festival', 'Best Non-Music Festival'
- Performance called 'The Visionary' originally produced for SO Festival, has subsequently gone on to tour Scandinavia and France and has many international bookings for next year
- Two successful companies to come out of SO Festival, 'The Visionary' and 'Desperate Men' are artists aged in their fifties, providing inspiration to a generation

# CHALLENGES & LESSONS LEARNT

## INCORPORATING SKILLS AND TRAINING FROM THE OUTSET

When first conceived in 2009, SO Festival had no elements of skills, training or volunteering built into its plan and as a result faced challenges with recruiting, upskilling and retaining a team of individuals to work on the programme. Learning from this, the new NPO positions skills, training and volunteering at its heart, with SO Festival working closely with local schools, colleges and training providers to ascertain what they need in order to better support the programme. In developing this close working relationship, SO Festival has made a fundamental change to its schedule and will be moving the event from its traditional dates in August to mid-June. Listening to feedback from schools and colleges, it became clear that they would be better able to support the programme with their staff and buildings, outside the summer holidays. Acknowledging that these timings may be at odds with local businesses, SO Festival highlights its passion to give people opportunities in life.

*“To get the best out of our relationship with local schools and colleges we had to change the dates of the festival”*

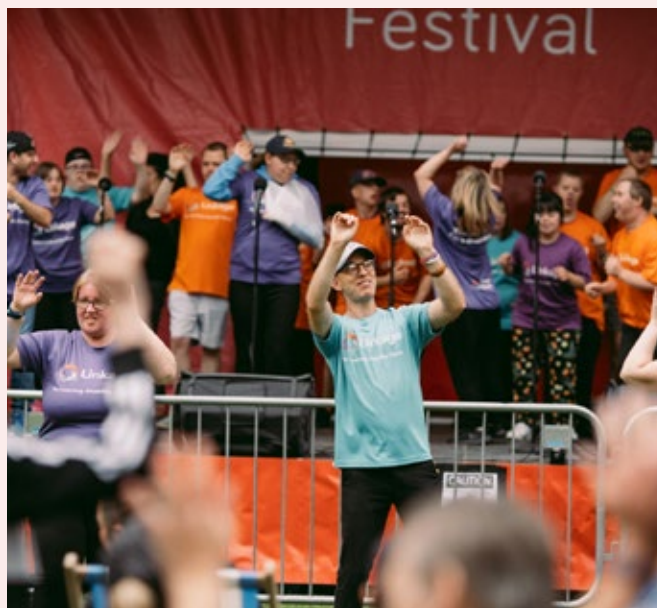
## THE CURRENT ECONOMIC CLIMATE

Although at present the wider company of Magna Vitae Trust for Leisure & Culture faces a significant recruitment challenge, SO Festival is not experiencing the same pressures and does not currently foresee this changing as there are still a lot of young people who find the arts industry interesting as a career option.

*“It’s a competitive market, we have got to make our training opportunities exciting and vibrant”*

## CONNECTING WITH THE COMMUNITY DURING COVID

Whilst the COVID pandemic undoubtedly posed challenges to the arts and culture industry, for SO Festival it also created opportunities. Aware that their own team, as well as the wider arts sector across Lincolnshire felt isolated and alone, the organisation initiated ‘The Social,’ an online meeting that brought the community together to discuss arts and culture and share their concerns. At its peak, up to one hundred individuals a week engaged with this network and has subsequently enabled SO Festival to develop a partnership-focused approach to its work.



## TAKING SO FESTIVAL ONLINE

In response to COVID, SO Festival was taken online in 2020 and SOfa Festo was born. Over two weekends, the event live-streamed content created by artists across Greater Lincolnshire and Europe, in collaboration with long-term partner the PASSAGE Festival. Thousands of people logged on over four full days to view content across various social media platforms.

## REVITALISING THE WORKFORCE POST COVID

Recruiting a workforce for the first outdoor festival post COVID was challenging. The organisation had effectively lost 2 years’ worth of contacts, people had changed careers, while some education courses had shifted focus when moving online. In response, SO Festival was forced to adapt its approach, going back to basics to contact individuals to secure their involvement. Reassuringly, indications suggest that the festival will return to pre-COVID recruitment levels in summer 2023.

## SEASONALITY OF EMPLOYMENT

The organisation acknowledges that employment in outdoor events and festivals is seasonal, and to maximise earnings during the summer months, individuals often spend considerable periods of time away from home. In response, through its development of the Culture House, SO Festival is aiming to provide year-round employment opportunities in this indoor venue through the support of its skills and training programme.

*“The Culture House will revolutionise our offer with year-round employment, skills and training in the local arts and culture sector”*



# TOP TIPS

1. Engage with your local cultural sector and involve them in your plans throughout
2. Speak to your local training and education partners from the outset and explore with them what you want to develop and the opportunities you want to offer
3. Be as generous with your time as you possibly can
4. Be open and honest about what you can and cannot achieve
5. Make sure you develop training opportunities that are fit for purpose and that you would want to have yourself

For more information about SO Festival:

James Brindle

[James.Brindle@mvtlc.org](mailto:James.Brindle@mvtlc.org)  
[www.sofestival.org](http://www.sofestival.org)

For more information about the Coastal Sustainability through careers and business skills in Greater Lincolnshire project:

Nicola Radford  
Senior Commissioning Officer  
Lincolnshire County Council

[nicola.radford@lincolnshire.gov.uk](mailto:nicola.radford@lincolnshire.gov.uk)  
[lincolnshire.gov.uk](http://lincolnshire.gov.uk)