

Bringing neighbouring towns together to create a festival weekend

THE CHALLENGE

The Forest of Dean was hit particularly hard by the Foot and Mouth crisis in 2001 with the numbers of local residents and tourists visiting the four main market towns dropping like a stone, impacting on shopkeepers and visitor attractions alike.

In a bid to draw visitors back, various events were being organised across all four Forest towns. Janet Marrott, Coleford Town Councillor and GMTF stalwart, was keen to develop another event – this time giving local people involved in learning and teaching dance of all varieties, a chance to show off their talent while attracting visitors at the same time.

The Forest of Dean Morris dancers used to do a tour in June, mainly based round local pubs. Janet felt that it would be a good idea to have an event actually in the towns which could also benefit the town traders.

DEVELOPING THE IDEA

As such an event would be too expensive for one town to host, all four Forest towns put forward two representatives each to form a steering group in the spirit of partnership which was beginning to prevail in the Forest of Dean District at the time.

Initially, the representatives were mainly Town Councillors – important as appeals for initial funding were to the Town Councils. Now half the steering group are Councillors and the other half are other community activists and volunteers. In addition to the Steering Group, a group of volunteers has been recruited in each town for the actual day.

The first task was to agree that a dance festival, where 12 groups of dancers, representing a wide range of dance styles from breakdancing to ballet and from line dancing to morris dancing, travelled around all four Forest market towns in one day, could actually work!

The next step was to become an accountable body – an organisation which could set up a bank account and could apply for external grants and funding. This required the following:

- A constitution.
- Policies covering Equal Opportunities, Health and Safety and Child Protection.





Constitutions for two existing local organisations - Coleford Better Towns Project and Coleford Crime Prevention Panel – were available as exemplars and which had already proved to be acceptable to funders. These were adapted to suit the purpose of Dancing through the Dean.

A similar approach was used with developing Health and Safety and Equal Opportunities policies – using existing policies as examples.

These documents were fully discussed and agreed, and with initial funding from the Foot and Mouth Recovery Fund, the Rural Development Programme, the four towns and the District Council, the annual Dancing through the Dean event was finally launched in 2002 to celebrate the Queen's Jubilee.

Additional support included £1,000 from the Oxford, Swindon and Gloucester Co-op (now Mid-counties Co-operative) Community Dividend Fund in 2005 and sponsorship in-kind from Forest-based Glaxo Smith Kline which has been on-going.

Applications for funding continue to be undertaken by the Steering Group. When the project first started, appeals for funds were extremely successful as there was plenty of support available to aid recovery from Foot and Mouth. However, this dried up and an approach was made to the Co-op in 2005. The Co-op was able to look favourable on the application as there is a Co-op store in each of the four Forest towns. Other local groups have started applying to the Co-op for funding so the Dancing through the Dean project is facing more competition for funding.

MAKING IT HAPPEN

Dancing through the Dean is a day-long celebration consisting of 12 teams of dancers giving a 30-minute performance in each of the Forest of Dean's four market towns.

The dancers are transported from town to town so that all 12 teams can be seen at some time during the day without the audience leaving their favourite spot. The performances take place in the town centres, encouraging visitors who accompany the dancers to shop in the small local shops. The event also gives local children a chance to show off their talent to a wider audience.

Although the audience itself is not always large, the festive atmosphere gives a real boost and visitors from outside the area always appreciate this real family occasion.

Dancing through the Dean is held on the second Saturday in July involving twelve teams of dancers who are transported around and in turn give pleasure to the increasing numbers who now come along to enjoy a magnificent display that lasts for six hours.



Local charitable organisations are encouraged to bring a stall along and help raise funds for their organisation.

Refreshments: Each town provides refreshments and a snack to the first three groups, ensuring all groups are fed and 'watered'. Sponsorship for soft drinks has come from Glaxo Smith Kline in previous years. Each town provides somewhere for the dancers to change, and each dance group is given £100 as a 'thank you' for entertaining four towns.

Coleford and Cinderford both receive adequate backing from their Town Council to pay for refreshments which are ordered from local suppliers, thus putting money into local businesses. Smith Kline are happy to donate drinks made at Coleford.

In the other two towns, the Town Councils currently only contribute to the Steering Group which means local volunteers in these towns have to ask for donations for refreshments.

Insurance: At Coleford and Cinderford, the event takes place on Town Council-owned land and is covered by the Councils' insurance. In the case of Newent the event happens on County Council-owned land and the County has accepted this as a risk. In the case of Lydney, the event takes place on privately-owned land at Newerne Street and the Lydney Festival covers the event as part of its month-long festival.

Stage: Stages are purpose-made for the actual location and responsibility lies with the local organisers in each town. Here again Coleford and Cinderford Town Councils have each paid for theirs and in Lydney and Newent, provision and construction is carried out by volunteers.

Street Closures: The event is organised in such a way that street closures are not required. However, at Cinderford for the past two years a Street Closure Order has been obtained for a very short stretch at The Triangle giving more space for freedom of movement. The police are informed annually about the event and to date have been satisfied with arrangements made. Interestingly, all venues are covered by the police CCTV systems.

Dancing through the Dean is now a major event which has its place on the district's events calendar, although funding is always an issue. It attracts people into the towns, who, in turn visit local shops and become aware of other festivals and activities.

Twelve 53-seater coach carry relatives and friends of each of the dance groups around all the towns, giving them a chance to discover the delights of market town shopping. As a result of dance groups being invited from outside the county, coach tours are now organised during the summer months to bring people back into the Forest after discovering its charms for the first time when accompanying their local dancers.



Dancing through the Dean is a non-profit making event run on a Saturday to try to encourage people to visit the market towns instead of driving to Cribbs Causeway and other places out of the area.

As with the other festivals organised in partnership with all four Forest market towns, Dancing through the Dean has resulted in the cementing of goodwill and friendship between individuals and whole communities, encouraging networking and the sharing of ideas and practical assistance.

KEEPING IT GOING

This remains the single greatest challenge. As the event is held in the public arena it is not possible to charge for admission and those enjoying the spectacle are not very generous when the bucket goes round.

Many funders will only consider one-off grants for new events and as the Dancing event expenditure is classed as a revenue requirement, this is a constant challenge although applications are made to the District Council for a Community Grant.

Over the past two years, organisers have had to dig into reserves, which causes problems. The Steering Group is currently looking for other sponsors to ensure the event can be delivered again this year.

There are so many worthy causes - and the more events that are developed in a town, the more local people are being asked to contribute. So far, traders have not been asked to contribute to the costs.

TOP TIPS

- Form a steering group with representatives of all partner organisations.
- Become an accountable body – agree a constitution and include Policies covering Equal Opportunities, Health and Safety and Child Protection.
- Check out Janet Marrott's expert advice about organising community events, gleaned from many years' experience, at www.town2town.org.uk and click on Case Studies.
- Be aware of the knock-on effects of community events – networking, raising awareness of towns to visitors and local people alike.
- Each town involved should contribute to a central fund to pay towards transport, dance groups and publicity.
- Take the opportunity to use the day as part of other events happening in each town – in 2006, it was part of Newent's week-long Arts Festival, at Cinderford it linked with Cinderford Fringe, Lydney included the event in its Festival, while at Coleford, in 2005, it was part of the town's 60th Anniversary of the Commemoration of the end of hostilities of World War 11.



- Be aware of the costs – transporting the teams around the towns for a day cost around £3,000, and be prepared to pay the dancing groups something for their hard work – entertaining hundreds of people and attracting visitors to your town.
- It must be remembered that food must be prepared in suitably registered premises by people who have undertaken a Food Hygiene course.

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Forest of Dean towns and visitor information

www.forest-online.co.uk

www.visitforestofdean.co.uk

Gloucestershire Market Towns Forum

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www.town2town.org.uk

Market and Coastal Towns Association

www.mcti.org.uk

Mid Counties Co-Op

www.midcounties.coop

South West Regional Development Agency

www.southwestrda.org.uk

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Each case study presents:

- the **initial challenge** or issue faced by the town
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- how it was **rolled out**
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