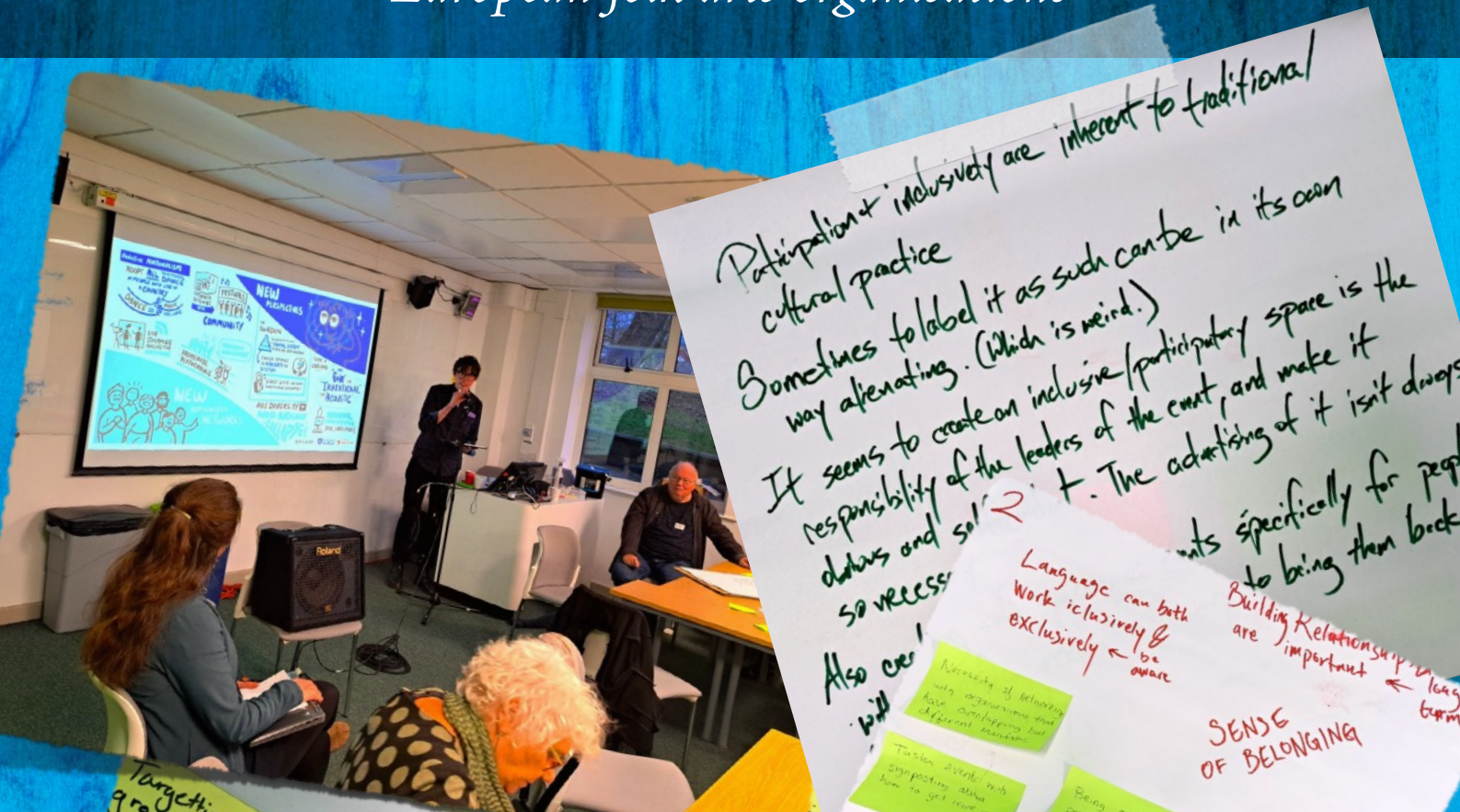


# STRATEGIES FOR WIDENING PARTICIPATION IN FOLK ARTS

Reflections and experiences from seven European folk arts organisations



Participation + inclusivity are inherent to traditional cultural practice  
 Sometimes to label it as such can be in its own way alienating. (Which is weird.)  
 It seems to create an inclusive (participatory) space is the responsibility of the leaders of the event, and make it others and self? t. The advertising of it isn't always so necessary.  
 Also over!  
 Language can both work inclusively & exclusively & be aware  
 Building Relationships are important to bring them back specifically for people to bring them back

Targetting certain groups and welcoming them!  
 Barriers - Misconceptions about what they expect it to be.  
 Nationalism  
 Accessible environments. Pubs/parks. Needs to be

Necessity of believing with organisations that have overlapping but different missions  
 Trusting people to negotiate their own way to get their message  
 Being aware of people who are interested in the competition for attention and to make sure you are not competing  
 Working with "competitors" so you don't undermine each other - audiences are limited  
 Getting people to try despite having no idea of folk - a conversation  
 Working with... so that they "buy in" and take feeling of ownership for work of the organisation  
 For large organisations - finding ways of clearly communicating identity work  
 Value of doing targeted activities for particular audiences  
 SHARING AUDIENCES W. OTHER ORG.



## Introduction

In popular discourse, folk music and dance tend to be seen as inextricably connected to specific groups or nations, regardless of the historical and social complexities often inherent in such folk practices. Today, European folk arts organisations are increasingly looking for ways of reaching new and more diverse groups of people (in terms of gender, sexuality, ethnicity, race, age, disability etc) to take part in their activities. This report introduces some strategies to this effect from small and medium-sized folk arts organisations from England, Scotland, Sweden, Germany, and Italy.

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## Negotiating heritage & diversity

With the spread of international heritage ideologies, the work of folk arts organisations and organisers in Europe today can be considered part of a heritage practice that, almost by definition, needs to be accessible and open to all people within the national context where they function. Increasing access to folk arts is generally seen as a positive thing. However, the idea that heritage practices belong to all people creates tensions between the enjoyment of an inclusive contemporary folk arts practice and its potentially excluding historical discourses. Folk arts organisations have to move between these poles, the contemporary practice and its historical discourse, in order to negotiate spheres of belonging that are based on participation and shared experiences in the present rather than adherence to a singular past. This means both redefining nationalism with a focus on geography more than culture or ethnicity, as well as grounding participants in the social context of the practice they want to take part in. Exclusion and inclusion, belonging and non-belonging, are part of a continuous process that folk arts organisations and organisers need to negotiate to remain relevant in contemporary Europe.

It is not an easy task, however, to bridge contemporary society's mosaic of lived experience by creating spaces which people want to enter rather than sending out tailored invitations. Making people feel part of a space - be it a community hall or the local funding system - is an ongoing process where building networks and learning together is key. The notion of widening participation in folk arts practices, that is to reach and include a wider variety of people, is intrinsically linked to multiple structural and financial issues that organisations and organisers need to deal with on an everyday basis. Moreover, the local context and priorities of folk arts organisations necessarily determine their individual strategic engagement with issues of diversity and access. An organisation centrally funded to specifically support young people, for example, has little reason to include a greater diversity of ages in its activities and programmes. Issues of capacity, too, limit the extent to which organisations can engage with and support distinct groups; instead, strategies tend to focus on specific groups at different times and in different localities, in line with wider demographic trends in the areas where they work.

This report presents strategies for diversifying participation from seven small and medium-sized European folk arts organisations who took part in the University of Sheffield Knowledge Exchange project *Increasing Diversity in Participatory Cultural Heritage Performance* (2023-2024).

## Strategies for widening participation

There are no straight and easy fixes for attracting a greater variety of participants. Meeting the needs of different groups requires different approaches. Importantly, making practices attractive to new people is likely to change the practices themselves in one way or another. The following strategies and examples are drawn from our workshop discussion and interviews. Some are more general than others, but all were brought up in the context of diversifying participation.

**Find a gap** and work together with other organisations and organisers rather than in competition with one another. Most folk arts organisations in Europe have limited resources, and being strategic about where an organisation's activities fit could avoid unnecessary competition with other organisations for the same potential participants and funding.

- ▷ Growing from a regular music session in their local Berlin neighbourhood, the Yiddish cultural organisation Shtetl Berlin saw a gap for a smaller festival aimed at their urban and international community. Rather than competing with other festivals, they have become an entry point for people wanting to explore Yiddish culture but who might not feel ready or comfortable to attend a larger event.
- ▷ Although there are multiple folk arts organisations working with young people in Sweden, the founders of FolkYou saw a gap in supporting the development of youth-led, and youth majority, folk arts organisations. With a focus on training and supporting youth leadership in managing structures for Swedish not-for-profit organisations, they have found a unique position that allows them to collaborate with a range of other organisations.

**Build networks and connections** with relevant organisations and organisers to reach new groups. Working with trusted institutions could help to give legitimacy to an organisation's activities and make it easier to make new connections. Being part of a network of other organisers in similar or different fields will bring new perspectives and opportunities to reflect on diversity and participation.

- ▷ As a relatively new organisation, the Italian community music organisation Canto Rovesciato noted that working together with their local municipality and being allowed to use their logo in promotion materials gave them some legitimacy in the eyes of new participants with whom they had no prior relationship.
- ▷ In order to connect with one of the larger migrant communities in Margate, England, the music venue Rosslyn Court organised a music event together with a local Polish community organisation. This brought in a range of people to their venue who had not visited previously and although only a few have returned for other events, they established an important community link.

**Organise but don't lose touch** with the grassroots. A formal organisational structure can be a key to growth. It could also be needed for basic things, like getting a bank account, renting venues or applying for funding. But formal structures come with a range of additional demands that can unsettle relationships with grassroots participants and practices. For loosely organised volunteer-led activities, establishing an organisation for the sake of being organised might not be the right way forward.

- ▷ In several European countries, having a formal organisation is needed to get public funding and to establish partnerships with local councils and institutions. Therefore, knowledge about how to organise and how to work within local not-for-profit systems is important to be able to influence the cultural landscape.

**Find the time and money** to reach new groups. Building new networks and connections, or finding new ways of telling people about established activities, takes time and resources that goes beyond the work organisers already do to maintain connections with regular participants.

- ▷ Membership fees can be a good way to get regular income and form a bond between an organisation and an individual. But, administrating fees takes time and there could be reasons to rethink their value. To free up time for their one employee, Traditional Dance Forum of Scotland decided to make membership free and instead focus on fundraising. Their rationale was that the time it took to administer membership fees was not proportionate to the small funds they brought in. By using that time fundraising, they have raised more money than they would have done by retaining the membership fees. Moreover, since abolishing membership fees they have had an increase in membership from groups that they had not worked with previously.
- ▷ Looking for funding opportunities that target specific demographics can be a useful way of reaching new groups. Folk You found a core funding stream outside of conventional arts funding bodies: since 2017 they are primarily funded by the Swedish government's Agency for Youth and Civil Society. Folk You's focus on folk arts is of little interest for the government agency, so instead they have to continuously show that they can reach and support enough young people through their activities.

**Consider the spaces where activities take place** and how they might work for different people. Making spaces accessible has both physical and social dimensions. Places like pubs, cafes, parks or community centres may be more or less appropriate depending on the target audience. Having clear information available for potential participants will also affect who feels comfortable taking part.

- ▷ Rosslyn Court has put a lot of effort into making their events welcoming and safe spaces for people of different backgrounds. In addition to improving physical access

to their venue, they note that people cannot really make an informed decision about going to a new event if they do not know what to expect and what facilities are available. This is particularly important for anyone with specific access needs. Therefore, Rosslyn Court makes sure to have plenty of accessible and up to date information available on their website.

- ▷ Wren Music has intentionally worked in partnership with local organisations, schools and councils to bring their activities to places where they can reach people who would be unlikely to just come along to one of their other events. Although they also run their own venue, doing ‘inreach’, that is, going into people’s usual environments, is central to their ethos as an organisation.

**Consider the language used in describing organisations** and events. It is important to think about wording when trying to reach new participants. Do not assume knowledge, and be aware that terms which are used in one context can have negative connotations in other contexts. The title of an event or the name of an organisation will have an impact on people’s perception of whether the activity is compatible with their interests, values, and abilities.

- ▷ With 40 years of experience of running community music projects, Wren Music noted the importance of actively building (and sustaining) a reputation as an organisation whose events cater for wide-ranging access needs. They highlighted that labelling an event as ‘inclusive’ does not necessarily attract the people most in need of an ‘inclusive’ event. Such labels can even be off-putting. Instead, they want to ensure that everyone working with their organisation is able to support a wide range of access needs and they’ve made this a key aspect of their work.

**Consider how diversity is reflected** in leadership and decision-making. For a small organisation or organiser, changes to the leadership could be counterproductive but decision-making can be made more equitable through partnerships or by establishing an advisory board.

- ▷ Several of the project’s partner organisations have trustees or advisory boards that provide not only specific expertise but also community networks that go beyond the organisations’ regular groups.

**Redefine nationalism** and widen the scope to include similar practices within a country, rather than practices only linked to a specific national ethnicity. For partners whose organisation or work included genres defined by nation, such as ‘Scottish’ dance or ‘English’ folk singing, perceptions around nationalism were an important issue.

- ▷ With an ambition to showcase and build connection across folk dance traditions practised in Scotland, Traditional Dance Forum of Scotland started the Pomegranate Festival. The festival revolves around a series of residencies,

productions and workshops. All participants take part in the entire series of 30-minute dance workshops accompanied by live music that are led by Scottish and migrant artists who are based in Scotland. This means that everyone gets a taste of the differences and similarities involved in a variety of dance traditions as practised in Scotland. This inclusive ethos builds connections across dancers, musicians, educators and organisers of folk dance and avoids a strict division between what is to be considered 'Scottish' and 'non-Scottish'.

**Focus on participation** and treasure the work of volunteers. Volunteers are an extension of an organisation's network and could be key to both make people feel welcome as well as being able to reach new people. Making sure that it is easy for people to participate and making it a social, as well as cultural experience can be important for reaching new groups.

- ▷ Canto Rovesciato highlighted the importance of festivals or gatherings where participants get to sing, eat and dance together. They summarised the power of belonging through participation with the words 'If we sing together, then we are home'.
- ▷ Shtetl Berlin noted that a volunteer-led model allows for a sense of community and co-ownership among both organisers and participants. One of their regular volunteers highlighted the value of being part of a community where everyone is 'paid in love' and all work together to make things happen.

**Change is possible** and sometimes it is not as complicated as it might seem. By being led by curiosity, openness and a joy for new discoveries, folk arts organisers might find that there is a larger variety of folk artists and activities out there than they had expected.

- ▷ Rosslyn Court highlighted that by simply setting themselves targets about how many women, minority folk artists and disabled artists they wanted to promote at their venue, they were able to very quickly challenge ingrained stereotypes around who is involved with folk music in England.

## About the project

The *Increasing diversity in participatory cultural heritage performance* project brought together representatives from seven small and medium-sized folk arts organisations from across Europe. Together, we shared experiences of diversifying participation and the strategies used to attract a greater variety of people to get involved with folk arts and cultural heritage. Based at the University of Sheffield, the project built networks and created opportunities for partners to learn from each other's experiences which we want to share with a wider audience through this report.

In the context of this project, 'increasing diversity in participation' means involving more people from a variety of different and intersecting backgrounds and life experiences (ethnicity, socio-economic, race, gender, age, disability, etc.). The project adopts the position that folk arts organisations benefit from reaching a variety of people in society regardless of their backgrounds. It also acknowledges that, due to historical and cultural circumstances, many folk and traditional arts organisations struggle to reach beyond their core base of participants. Although experiences and thoughts about diversity differed across partner organisations and the contexts in which they work, there was a shared understanding that it was an important issue that they all address in different ways.

The strategies presented in this report are based on an in-person workshop at the University of Sheffield in early 2024 as well as interviews and conversations with the partner organisations in the summer and autumn of 2023. The document is not intended to be a conventional "best practice" document; instead it highlights a variety of strategies and experiences from a range of small- to medium-scale organisations at different stages in their development. The report should be read together with the included illustrated notes from the project workshop.

The project was led by researchers from [Access Folk](#). Visit our [open research collection for more information and resources](#) about supporting participation and diversity in folk arts, including translations of illustrated workshop notes into Swedish, Italian and Scottish Gaelic.





Redefine **NATIONALISM**  
 ADOPT TRADITIONAL DANCE OF ALL PEOPLE WHO LIVE IN A COUNTRY

DANCE AND MUSIC ARE LINKED

INTIMATE SESSIONS INTO FESTIVALS

COMMUNITY

LIVE STREAMING ACCESS FOR EVERYONE

AUDIENCE + INVOLVEMENT

PROMENADE PERFORMANCE

NEW AUDIENCES + NETWORKS

**NEW PERSPECTIVES**

IN MANY COUNTRIES YOU NEED TO FOLLOW A FORMAL SYSTEM TO RUN AN ORGANISATION

SEEK GUIDANCE TO NAVIGATE THE SYSTEM

STRICT LIMITS ON WHO YOUR FUNDING CAN SUPPORT



TERMS CAN MATTER

NOT "folk" BUT "TRADITIONAL" OR "ACOUSTIC"?

AGE DIVERSITY TO AVOID PARTICIPATION "COLLAPSE"

INFORMAL COMMUNITY SPACES (eg. PUBS OR PARKS)



# BELONGING

**THE LANGUAGE OF INCLUSION DIFFERS AROUND THE WORLD**

TRADITIONAL DANCE PARTICIPATORY AT HEART

THE AIM IS: BUILDING A COMMUNITY

MUSIC · ART · DANCE AS A MEANS TO AN END

**DIVERSITY**  
often feels like putting people in boxes again

A COMMUNITY FOR EVERYONE

ENCOURAGING PARTICIPATION BY UPDATING TRADITIONS

FLEXIBLE INVOLVEMENT

**PARTNERSHIPS**

REACH OUTSIDE THE FOLK MOVEMENT (AND COMFORT ZONE)

TASTER SESSIONS AND NETWORKING "A WAY IN"

SNEAK FOLK MUSIC INTO OTHER CONTEXTS

LEARNING HOW TO BRING DIVERSE GROUPS TOGETHER

10/01/2024 University of Sheffield Scribbled by NIFTY FOX

# WORKING INSIDE THE SYSTEM

**THE COSTS**  
(BOTH PERSONAL + FINANCIAL)

NEED FUNDING OR THE PUBLIC HAS TO PAY

ACCESS TO PUBLIC FUNDS DIFFERS

BREXIT STOPPED UK → EU FUNDING

WINNING FUNDING TAKES IT FROM SOMEONE ELSE

BURDEN OF REPORTING

PIVOT TO SUPPORTING COMMUNITY FUNDRAISING AND ORGANISATION CREATION INSTEAD

MULTIPLE FUNDING STREAMS FOR SUSTAINABILITY

ADMIN IS TIME CONSUMING

PRIORITISE + FIND OTHER APPROACHES

GROWING TOGETHER TO ENCOURAGE NEW FUNDING OPPORTUNITIES

UNDERSTANDING VOLUNTEER VALUE

CLARITY COMMUNICATING WHAT WE DO

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# FINAL GROUP DISCUSSION



HOLDING ONTO  
**TRADITION** vs  
**NEW WAYS**  
OF DOING THINGS



**NATIONAL**  
vs **LOCAL**  
NETWORK  
CONNECTIONS

LOCAL RESPONSIBILITY TO PROMOTE

**TRADITIONAL ARTS**  
HAVE **LONG HISTORIES**

IT'S HARD  
TO FOLLOW THE

WHO CAN  
OFFER  
GUIDANCE

**GRASSROOTS MUSIC**



**FRUGAL FEST**

HOW TO RUN EVENTS  
WITHOUT OVER-INVESTING  
OR BURNING OUT



**AND FASHIONS CHANGE**

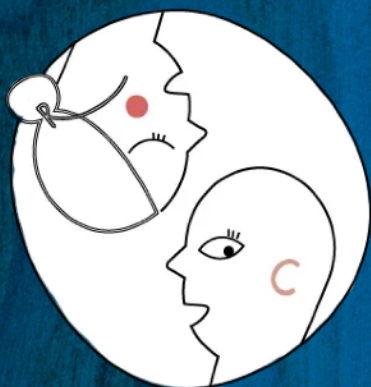
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**NIFTY FOX**



## Partner Organisations



**Canto Rovesciato** is an Italian community music organisation based in San Miniato, Tuscany. Founded in 2021 by a group of artists and educators, they work together to develop a community of singers in and around their geographic area. They run community choirs drawing on Italian and international folk songs as well as other music and song events focused on inclusion and participation. At the 2024 workshop they were represented by Simone Faraoni and Ilaria Savini.



**Folk You** is an umbrella organisation for youth folk arts organisations in Sweden. Active in its current form since 2017, they train and support young people to be able to register their not-for-profit organisations and run their own events. They are regularly consulted on youth issues by other organisations in the Swedish folk scene and offer funding and bursaries for youth-led activities. At the 2024 workshop they were represented by Isa Holmgren and Hanna Lenander



**Rosslyn Court** is a music venue and Bed and Breakfast based in Margate, Kent, England. Since 2018 they have organised music and culture events with the aim of engaging the usual folk music crowd while also developing a programme of activities that is attractive and accessible to a wide section of their local community. At the 2024 workshop they were represented by Morag Butler and Christopher Butler.



**Shtetl Berlin** is a grassroots organisation and festival for Yiddish culture in Berlin, Germany. Started in 2016, and growing out of the long-running Neukölln Klezmer Sessions, they want to educate more (including non-Jewish) people about Yiddish culture through taking part in engaging workshops and culture events. At the 2024 workshop they were represented by Patrick Farrell and Elisabeth Mann.





Soundpost is a community and folk music organisation in Sheffield, South Yorkshire, England. Founded in 2011 by a group of folk artists, they run workshops and regular folk instrumental and vocal ensembles for different age groups. At the 2024 workshop they were represented by Rosie Butler-Hall, Rosie Hodgson, and Laura Hegarty.



Traditional Dance Forum of Scotland is an umbrella organisation for Scottish traditional dance attached to the national organisation Traditional Arts and Culture Scotland (TRACS). They encourage collaboration and exchange across all traditional dance forms practised in Scotland through residencies, festivals and productions. Since 2022 they are running the annual Pomegranate Festival in Edinburgh, which aims to showcase the diversity of traditional dance in Scotland. At the 2024 workshop they were represented by Wendy Timmons and Iliyana Nedkova.



Wren Music is a community music organisation based in Okehampton, Devon, England. Since 1983 they have been drawing on local music traditions in their projects and in particular they want to bring music to people who otherwise have had little access to folk music. They have a strong focus on inclusion and social justice and have been involved in many projects for people with special educational needs, health issues or from economically deprived areas. At the 2024 workshop they were represented by Jon Dyer and Marilyn Tucker.



**Access  
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