

INSPIRING

EARLY YEARS



STORY EXPLORERS CASE STUDY



Designed especially for children aged 2 – 5 and their families

Story Explorers Case Study

What did we set out to do?

Inspire Nottinghamshire Libraries, like most public library services, have a strong track record of work with children aged under 5 and their families. Libraries across Nottinghamshire run regular rhyme sessions and story sessions attracting tens of thousands of children annually.

We wanted to build on this foundation to enhance our offer to our youngest customers and develop an exciting cultural programme for early years children and their families. Supported by Arts Council England, National Portfolio Organisation (NPO) funding we wanted the programme to introduce early years children to new experiences, support their learning and language skills and

to create memorable and fun experiences in the library. The early years programme had three strands: one focused on visual arts (*Little Creatives*), one on music (*Adventures in Music*) and one on story and drama (*Story Explorers*).

Sessions took place at our largest 12 libraries between 2018 – 2023.



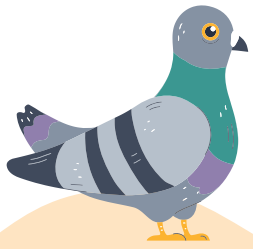
We wanted to create interactive story and drama sessions designed to stimulate the imagination of children and their parents and carers.

We wanted sessions to be a memorable experience for children with opportunities for interaction.

The resulting programme was named **Story Explorers** and created in partnership with the Participation Department at **Nottingham Playhouse**.

See Appendix 1 for list of creative team and casts





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How did we do it?

- We had informal discussions with the participation team at Nottingham Playhouse and visited sensory play sessions run by them to clarify a shared understanding of what was needed and what was possible.
- A brief was created to outline in writing what, as a library service, we wanted from the project along with a general framework for how the project might run.

The brief included details such as:

Funding available

Number of sessions required

For us this was 3 'seasons' throughout the year at 12 libraries each season, totalling 36 sessions annually.

Due to this relative infrequency – there was a requirement for sessions to be self-contained.

Target age range

This was 2 – 5 for Story Explorers, with an acknowledgement that the library audience would predominantly be at the younger end of the range, including under 2s.

Maximum capacity of sessions

This would vary due to size of the library, but the nature of sessions meant a suggested maximum of 20 children plus parents/ carers. In practice most libraries accommodated fewer than this.

Proposed schedule of the work

Suggested running time
45mins – 1 hour

- We also shared our audience demographic information to outline the differing levels of arts engagement across the county.

Although in the brief it was essential to be clear on the parameters for the work. Our National Portfolio Organisation (NPO) funding was allowing us to utilise the skills and experiences of other creative practitioners, expanding our early years offer to programmes we couldn't achieve in-house.

Therefore we were careful to not be prescriptive on content or format, to allow the partner and practitioners to use their expertise to advise on a suitable approach to meet our aims.



What did we do?

Nottingham Playhouse developed a proposal for imaginative sessions built on communication and language development, movement, pretend and sensory play, and adult-child interaction.

- **Story Explorers** would take inspiration from the natural environment, habitats, climates, and animals.
- Would be designed as a creative open learning process, child-led, with active learning through puppetry and original storytelling.
- The session would involve a journey to a new environment, where the children, parents and carers could explore and learn together.
- Each environment would offer different play opportunities with sensory resources designed to support the experience.
- Puppets would be the focus for the storytelling.
- There would be a series of interactive moments, using simple materials to touch, smell, hear and see, building an approach of sensory interaction and maximising opportunities for greater confidence with stories and language.



This resulted in:

- The creation of an original story centred on the adventurous exploration of Little Owl.
- A designed theatrical backdrop that transformed our library spaces into Granny and Little Owl's house, before unfolding into the habitats Little Owl (and our audience) explore. These included going under the sea, to polar lands, the forest, space, the desert and more.
- Imaginative costumes, props, and puppets to support and enhance the story.
- Performance storytelling delivered by theatrical practitioners.



INSPIRING EARLY YEARS



Though sessions evolved as the project developed and the creative team changed. There were repeating 'pillars' to a Story Explorers' session.

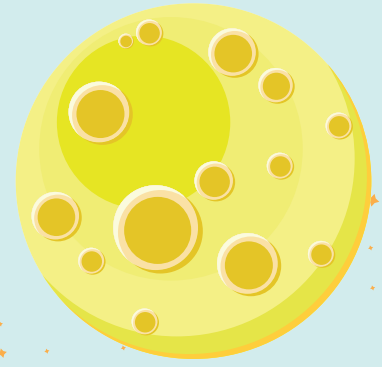
- Families were welcomed into the library space, often sitting in a circle initially and browsing library books on the theme of story until the start time for the session.
- The performers introduced themselves, sang a hello song, and set the scene for that day's story — sometimes with props/puppets or actions and movements that would re-appear in the main story.
- The stories always started at Granny Owl's house with her and Little Owl. This would springboard to Little Owl's adventures to various lands.
- Little Owl would find a mission to accomplish along his journey.
- Always returning to Granny Owl's house as the story concluded.
- The actors would 'return' as themselves to thank everyone and sing a goodbye song.



Moments of interaction

All shows were designed to include moments of interaction at various points in the story. For example, the forest themed story included all children receiving collecting bags to collect objects that would then be returned into the story. The design would often incorporate elements that could be replicated at home e.g. Under the Sea featured jellyfish created from shower puffs. Each story was self-contained. However, the repeating appearance of Granny and Little Owl, meant children who had visited before gained familiarity with how the story worked and the characters. *See Appendix 2a for outline session.*





What were the results?

Feedback from attendees consistently demonstrated that the sessions had met the brief to be imaginative, interactive and memorable.

- Between 2018 – 2022 we held 112 performances in library venues plus 2 online stories were created when Covid prevented in-person events. *See Appendix 2b for story titles.*
- This figure includes 9 performances made possible by additional funding from the **Miner2Major Landscape Partnership Scheme** which meant we could extend our reach to smaller libraries outside of our 12 NPO libraries.



2,808 attended
1,449 Children
1,359 Adults

32%

of those who completed an evaluation survey (n.978) said they hadn't been to an event in that library before

17%

of those that answered the question said they weren't currently a member of the library



112 performances in library venues between 2018 – 2022

Maximum capacity depended on the size of the library. Sessions in September 2021 had slightly reduced capacities to support customers feeling more comfortable with a return to in-person events.

- **Story Explorers become a highly anticipated event.** Regularly becoming fully booked on release of tickets. This could be challenging as there were comments from frustrated customers who weren't able to book.
- Sessions remained popular throughout the NPO funding cycle, and we found families travelled to attend sessions outside of their local area if their 'home' library was fully booked.
- 12 libraries had a maximum of 3 stories a year. Despite this relatively infrequent nature – many comments on feedback forms referred to how memorable the shows were, and they would remember elements of previous stories that developed as the series went on (e.g., the introduction of Uncle Buzz, a puppet character who made appearances in subsequent stories sometimes just as image as part of the set).

"Brilliant. My 3 year old, 9 month old and I were all transfixed!"

"A lovely performance - the interactive elements made it so much fun."

"A real treat for young children to experience local theatre."



What was the impact?

- The sessions supported early learning skills for children, including:

Turn taking (especially in the sensory play introduction as they waited to meet a puppet, smell the sensory object, receive their item etc.)

Listening

Language development – encouraged to repeat join in, discover new words as travelled to different lands

Learning how to be an audience member – the performance supported children develop the sophisticated skill of recognising and understanding when to join in and when to watch the story unfold

Modelling imaginative play for parents/carers who may find that challenging

- The imaginative and playful sessions supported parents and carers to develop skills and confidence in sharing stories.
- Exceeded expectations of library customers in terms of quality of the event. Which in turn garnered loyalty and advocacy for the work of the library service

"Absolutely brill! Wasn't sure what to expect but better than expecting! So interactive, informative, fun, and a wonderful experience."

"Fantastic, definitely the best event I have been to at a library. Better than expectations."



What was the impact?

cont'd...

- **Supported Nottingham Playhouse in their work to extend their reach across city boundaries and reach those who may not visit a traditional theatre venue.**
- **The project also supported actors in the early part of careers to extend the audience they worked with and the venues they performed in. In turn, this helped challenge any preconceived ideas about libraries.**
- **Repeat visitors to Story Explorers talked about the impact on their children and the memorable nature of the performances.**
- **Returning Story Explorers also mentioned how they have made use of the ideas in the performances including making a jellyfish following Under the Sea and making their own collector bag after Fantastical Forests.**



"Story Explorers is always a wonderful experience! My child is always so engaged with the story and has a wonderful time! Every child deserves to experience it!"

"Always memorable for the right reasons, play a big part in both my children's memories."

"This is my third Story Explorers we've been to and my son loves it just as much as me!! It was amazing once again."





What did we learn?

- **Collaborative approach with an enthusiastic, expert partner with shared aims delivered a quality experience for library customers.**

It was important that Story Explorers wasn't simply an event we made space for and hosted. But that its creation was built around the library and a library ethos. Feedback from our attendees often commented on the friendly staff and welcome in addition to praise for the quality of the performance.

- **Nominal charge helped to secure attendance.**

Initially sessions were free, but this led to a high proportion of non-attenders at some libraries. (76% of those that booked overall in the first set of sessions attended. This attendance vs booking figure ranged from 38% – 100%). As maximum numbers were modest due to nature of session and library space, non-attendees made a big impact.

We introduced a small charge of £2 per child with accompanying adults being free. This helped ensure more commitment to attend, balanced with a desire to ensure as few barriers to access as possible. Even with the charge there were still variations in number of non-attendees.

- **New offers take time to build.**

Ticket booking for the first set of Story Explorers was slow as we worked out how to promote it so that families understood what they were attending. Brand recognition of Nottingham Playhouse helped but wasn't an instant sell for those who weren't theatre goers.

Seeing sessions in action helped library staff to better communicate the offer.

"Welcoming and accommodating staff. Great Creative production!"

"Fabulous players, welcoming staff, comfortable atmosphere for children."

"Love the library, which is important as we home educate, and love Story Explorers."

"One of the best performances we have been to and value for money."



What did we learn?

cont'd...

- **Having an overarching name for the programme, Story Explorers, helped to support promotion and build brand recognition.**

Each story had its own title but having a programme name supported understanding of what to expect. This was supported by consistent marketing materials that retained the same look and feel for each different story. *See Appendix 2c for publicity examples.*

- **An ongoing programme with the same partner allowed development of ideas and the ability to respond to suggestions for change/improvement.**

For example, initially sessions include a short break for children to have drink of water to mark the transition from the sensory play element and ensure they could settle to the story. But this started to interpret the flow of the session.

Changes were also made to support families who may not be familiar with a theatre style show including more specific direction, delivered as part of the story, around the areas children were encouraged to stay e.g. not venture 'backstage' or on the set.

Top tips to run a similar programme

- **Ensure a mutual understanding of goals with partner but not a fixed idea of the finished product.**
- **Have regular reviews and feedback with partners and internally.**
- **Have a formal agreement with your partner to outline roles and responsibilities, covering data sharing, intellectual property, credit for the work that is created etc.**
- **Consider branding and marketing costs to give project best chance of success.**
- **Do have a coordinator/link post in the service who can liaise with the partner and library venues to ensure streamlined communication and consistency of approach.**
- **Be adaptable in the development of ideas and be ready to be flexible.**
- **Be confident about what libraries can offer theatre venues in addition to the huge benefits the library receives from their creative expertise.**
- **Share your knowledge of your library customers/audience – so that created work is appropriate for the children who will likely attend and matches the welcome libraries want to give.**
- **Build in contingency. The Story Explorers project grew though the funding cycle. Funding models and the creative team changed. Regular reviews of the agreement allow this to be managed or the project adapted in light of changing situations.**



What did we learn?

cont'd...



Top tips to run a similar programme

- **Don't underestimate the importance of logistical and practical considerations to enable the programme to run smoothly. Consider:**

- ✓ Size of space needed – get the tape measure out!

This is an important criterion to have a good, shared understanding of. For theatres who have a black box space to rehearse (with high ceilings!) it is important to be clear on what space and equipment is available in the library. Helpful too for them to know whether it will be in children's library or a library that is open to the public or a separate meeting space.

- ✓ Timing of sessions – ensure times allow for set up/pack up/travel – lunch for practitioner! And at times when you know your early years audience will be more likely to attend.

- ✓ Manageable travel times between venues – suggest no more than 30 minutes.

- ✓ Give your partner the details they need to find venue easily and top tips on parking. If they will use a van:

- does the car park you are directing them to have a height barrier?

- ✓ Library staff support needed

- ✓ Give clear and timely communication to library staff about:

- What the event is and how to promote to customers.

- What to expect on the day. Will furniture need to be moved – who will do that?

Our partnership with Nottingham Playhouse will continue over 2023 – 2026, we are building on the knowledge gained and will be creating new workshop and performance opportunities for early years children and their parents/carers to be immersed in.

About Nottingham Playhouse

Nottingham Playhouse is one of the UK's leading producing theatres, creating a range of productions throughout the year as well as running wide-reaching participation schemes, youth theatres and its Amplify programme, which seeks to inspire and support theatre-makers from the East Midlands.

**NOTTINGHAM
PLAYHOUSE**



Appendix 1

Creative Team and Casts

A talented team from, and commissioned by, Nottingham Playhouse brought Story Explorers to life in Inspire libraries.

CREATIVES

Manya Benenson – Originator, writer and director

Martin Berry – Director

Dawn Richmond-Gordon – Director

Hannah Stone – Director

Sarah West Valstar – Director

Erin Fleming – Designer

Ella Barraclough – Re-designer

Sophie Johnson-Hill – Animator

Ali Bakewell – Company Manager

CASTS

Manya Benenson

Sarah West Valstar

Lucy Mackay-Jones

Gemma Caseley-Kirk

Adam Horvath

Sarah Moat

Chandni Mistry

Appendix 2a

Example session: Fantastical Forests story summary and example of interactive elements

- All children are given a 'collecting bag' as they enter the space.
- Session begins with interactive sensory play exploring props including pinecones, flowers and apples.
- Each child stores one of each item in their collecting bag as the story begins.
- Little Owl's adventures take him to the forest.
- Along Owl's travels he meets various creatures including squirrels, hedgehogs and bees- each animal needs the children to find an item from their collecting bag and return it to the story.
- A mischievous frog enters and tries to take the items and drops litter in the forest.
- Frog later is helped, via the friends he makes (and our audience), to understand how to look after the forest.



Story Explorers: Fantastical Forests

A playful and interactive storytelling adventure for children aged 2 – 5

Taking place at the following libraries (dates and times for each library will vary):
Arnold | Beeston | Bingham | Hucknall | Kirby-in-Ashfield | Mansfield | Newark
Retford | Southwell | Sutton-in-Ashfield | West Bridgford | Worksop

ALSO VISITING: Blidworth | Calverton | Edwinstowe | Mansfield Woodhouse
Ollerton (St Paulinus Church) | Ravenshead

Please visit www.inspireculture.org.uk/explorers for more details

Inspire
Nottinghamshire County Council
NOTTINGHAM PLAYHOUSE
ARTS COUNCIL ENGLAND



Story Explorers: Fantastical Forests

Designed especially for children aged 2 – 5 and their families

A magical storytelling journey for you and your little one

In association with Nottingham Playhouse

Through puppetry, music and sensory play Story Explorers will unleash your child's imagination and take them on an exciting storytelling adventure. Join us as we head deep into the forest – what woodland creatures will we find?

Taking place at the following libraries:

Arnold Library, Saturday 25 June - 2pm
Beeston Library, Saturday 25 June - 10am
Bingham Library, Thursday 23 June - 2pm
Hucknall Library, Friday 17 June - 2pm
Kirby-in-Ashfield Library, Saturday 18 June - 10.30am
Mansfield Central Library, Saturday 18 June - 2pm
Newark Library, Friday 24 June - 2pm
Retford Library, Tuesday 21 June - 10.30am
Southwell Library, Friday 24 June - 10.30am
Sutton-in-Ashfield Library, Friday 17 June - 10.30am
West Bridgford Library, Thursday 23 June - 10.30am
Worksop Library, Tuesday 21 June - 2pm

Thanks to funding from the Miners' Major Landscape Partnership Scheme Story Explorers also travels to:

Blidworth Library
Tuesday 24 June - 10.30am
Calverton Library
Thursday 16 June - 10.30am
Edwinstowe Library
Monday 23 June - 10.30am
Mansfield Woodhouse Library
Wednesday 22 June - 10.30am
Ollerton (St Paulinus Church)
Wednesday 15 June - 10.30am
Ravenshead Library
Monday 20 June - 10.30am

£2 per child, accompanying adult free
Places are limited so booking advised.

Book your place online at www.inspireculture.org.uk/explorers

Appendix 2b

List of story themes for Story Explorers

Through puppetry, music and sensory play Story Explorers will unleash your child's imagination and take them on an exciting storytelling adventure. In association with Nottingham Playhouse.

Under The Sea

Through puppetry, music and sensory play Story Explorers will unleash your child's imagination and take them on an exciting storytelling adventure. In association with Nottingham Playhouse.

Date

September/
October 2018



Polar Adventures

We set off to explore snowy polar lands – make sure you wrap up warm!

Date

January 2019



Fantastical Forests

We head deep into the forest – what woodland creatures will we find?

Date

May 2019



Dramatic Deserts

Join Little Owl, a talking Cactus and a comical camel as they journey together through the hot sands to solve an ancient mystery and discover the amazing secrets and creatures of the desert.

Date

September 2019



Appendix 2b

List of story themes for Story Explorers

cont'd...

Up, Up and Away

Story Explorers launches into orbit as we travel to the moon! Expect magical music, beautiful puppets and starry surprises in an extra special story of wonder from across the solar system.

Date

December 2019



Into The Jungle

Grab your adventure boots and come with us into the jungle. Little Owl meets some of his most amazing friends yet as he finds out all about the life, sounds and drama of the jungle.

Date

March 2020



Story Explorers Online

- Under The Sea
- Rainforest Rescue

www.inspireculture.org.uk/explorersonline

Date

December 2020
April 2021



Little Owl Goes to Town

Welcome to Granny Owl's house, she's never been happier to see you!

There's so much to see and do and new adventures waiting for you.

Little Owl is desperate to get his Granny a birthday present, join him on an intrepid adventure into town and help him find the perfect gift. Will Rat and Pigeon be able to guide him through the thrills and spills of life up-town? Help him find his way and discover what truly matters.

Date

September 2021



Appendix 2b

List of story themes for Story Explorers

cont'd...

Up, Up and Away

Story Explorers launches into orbit as we travel to the moon! Expect magical music, beautiful puppets and starry surprises in an extra special story of wonder from across the solar system.

Date

December 2021



Down, Down Underground

Grab your adventure boots and come deep down under the earth. Little Owl meets some of his most amazing friends yet as he finds out all about the life, sounds and drama of life underground.

Date

March 2022



Fantastical Forests

We head deep into the forest – what woodland creatures will we find?

Date

June 2022



Appendix 2c

Examples of publicity material



Story Explorers
Little Owl Goes to Town

A playful and interactive storytelling adventure for children aged 2 – 5

Taking place at the following libraries (dates and times for each library will vary):
Arnold | Beeston | Bingham | Hucknall | Kirkby-in-Ashfield
Mansfield | Newark | Retford | Southwell
Sutton-in-Ashfield | West Bridgford | Worksop

Please visit www.inspireculture.org.uk/explorers for more details

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Story Explorers
Little Owl Goes to Town

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A magical storytelling journey for you and your little one

In association with Nottingham Playhouse

Welcome to Granny Owl's house, she's never been happier to see you! There's so much to see and do and new adventures waiting for you. Through puppetry, music and sensory play, Story Explorers unleashes your child's imagination and takes you on an enchanting and exciting storytelling adventure together.

Little Owl is desperate to get his Granny a birthday present, join him on an intrepid adventure into town and help him find the perfect gift. Will Rat and Pigeon be able to guide him through the thrills and spills of life up-town? Help him find his way and discover what truly matters.

£2 per child, accompanying adult free, places limited so booking advised.

Taking place at the following libraries:

- Hucknall Library, Monday 6 September – 10.30am
- Sutton in Ashfield Library, Monday 6 September – 2pm
- Southwell Library, Tuesday 7 September – 10.30am
- Mansfield Central Library, Tuesday 7 September – 2pm
- Bingham Library, Wednesday 8 September – 10.30am
- Newark Library, Wednesday 8 September – 2pm
- West Bridgford Library, Thursday 9 September – 10.30am
- Beeston Library, Thursday 9 September – 2pm
- Worksop Library, Friday 10 September – 10.30am
- Retford Library, Friday 10 September – 2pm
- Kirkby in Ashfield Library, Saturday 11 September – 10.30am
- Arnold Library, Saturday 11 September – 2pm

Book your place online at www.inspireculture.org.uk/explorers



Story Explorers
Up, Up and Away

A playful and interactive storytelling adventure for children aged 2 – 5

Taking place at the following libraries (dates and times for each library will vary):
Arnold | Beeston | Bingham | Hucknall | Kirkby-in-Ashfield
Mansfield | Newark | Retford | Southwell
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£2 per child, accompanying adult free, places limited so booking advised.

Taking place at the following libraries:

- West Bridgford Library, Monday 6 December – 10.30am
- Bingham Library, Monday 6 December – 2pm
- Beeston Library, Tuesday 7 December – 10am
- Arnold Library, Tuesday 7 December – 2pm
- Southwell Library, Wednesday 8 December – 10.30am
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