

Report for: University of Sheffield Public Engagement and Impact Team

Life Festival May 2014: Evaluation Report Summary

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hope-stone
research

t/f +44 (0)1934 740386

m +44 (0)7977 414948

e info@hopestoneresearch.co.uk

w www.hopestoneresearch.co.uk

1. Introduction

Life: A festival of health from head to toe is “a celebration of the work that the University of Sheffield’s medicine, dentistry and health researchers are doing to improve people’s lives.” It took place between 19-24th May 2014.

This report is based on an evaluation of activities and feedback during one day of the Life Festival at the University of Sheffield Faculty of Medicine, Dentistry and Health and an online survey afterwards. The evaluation was carried out on 21st May 2014 for the Public Engagement and Impact Team (the Team).

2. Methodology

A qualitative and quantitative evaluation took place and comprised 4 components:

1. Observations of visitor interaction with the festival activities. Observations were of the following:
 - Fun activities for families
 - Smashing strawberries
 - Fun, games and teeth
 - Technology of the future
 - Fishing for clues
 - Game technology against cancer
 - Inside bones
 - After cancer treatment: What now? (Including film screening and Phoenix project)
2. Face-to-face visitor intercept interviews with visitors/families/ groups to the events (n=18)
3. Face-to-face - interviews with Professor Paul Hellewell, Faculty Director of Research and Innovation and Susan Bridgeford, Faculty Director of Operations who both took a lead role in facilitating the festival.
4. Online feedback survey following the Life Festival among academics and researchers who presented (23 responses out of a potential 35 who were sent the link). These respondents are based in departments across the Faculty of Medicine, Dentistry and Health as well as within SITraN, the department of Biomedical Science (Faculty of Science) and the Clinical Skills Centre (Northern General Hospital) among others.

Details of the research interview guides and observation guide can be found in the appendices.

Shirley Kennedy conducted the evaluation.

NOTE: The findings reflect the views of these participants only.

3. Summary

A. Visitors to Life Festival

- There was a mix of ways visitors heard about the festival; some of the visitors interviewed were attached to the university in some way already although others were coming because they had heard about it externally or due to being on mailing lists.

What visitors liked about the event

- Visitors said that coming to see what the university/ faculty do is a positive experience.
- Those attending gave **appreciative** comments.
- The engagement event was pitched right. The presenters and members of the Team were welcoming and open to questions. The festival was easily accessible and the timing of the activities seemed appropriate.
- Events for families were highly interactive and school-age children especially got a lot from this.
- Life Festival offered families, as well as adults themselves, the opportunity to participate and become better informed. The feedback reinforces the observed experiences of increased understanding and inspiration – from the importance of DNA to zebrafish genes and from the health applications of university-developed technologies to finding out about personal stories of cancer.
- This is also borne out by the keenness of respondents to recommend the Life Festival to their family and friends, and to attend a future festival were it to happen.

What visitors found inspiring and what they learnt

- In the main, the public were **inspired** by things that they enjoyed. Also thought-provoking were elements of the interactive process itself. Some examples are:
 - trying to manipulate a computerized arm while hearing about its usefulness in treatment
 - handling laboratory equipment as if conducting an experiment
 - the emotional impact of the young people's stories about their recovery to health
 - processing pieces of art by several artists dealing with the effect of cancer on human relationships
- Overall, audience feedback from the Life Festival and the observation data demonstrated to varying degrees evidence of the following learning objectives:
 - Developing knowledge and understanding (Fun activities for families, After cancer treatment)
 - Improving skills (Fun activities for families)
 - Delivering enjoyment, inspiration and creativity (Fun activities for families, After cancer - inspiration)

- Stimulating activity (Fun activities for families, After cancer)
- Changing attitudes (After cancer)

The effect of attending

- Several people coming to the Life Festival were already aware of the university's outreach activities (with schools) as well as public engagement events. However this added a new dimension, enabling them to catch a glimpse of the fun side as well as perceive the breadth of research covered.
- In turn, they were very likely to talk about it when they left.
- In the longer term the event can also be seen as kick-starting latent interests in science or helping steer younger groups towards related work and studies in the future.

B. Report from the Internal interviewees

Importance / benefits of Public Engagement to the university

- The primary advantage which public engagement brings to the university is to generate impact for the REF. This will grow in significance over time as recognition of case study examples increases.
- Also, engaging in this way may ultimately lead to greater promotional prospects for staff, while in the shorter term offering collaboration opportunities.
- The indirect benefit to the university "community" is to the public. Engagement represents a bridge - between the university and its external communities, of all ages, in Sheffield. Better understanding of the faculty's contribution to wider society may come as a result of public engagement. A good example is how this festival has boosted the profile of clinical research and demonstrated the connections between the university and the Sheffield Teaching Hospitals NHS Trust.

The Team

- The Team demonstrate pro-activeness around event management and knowledge of how to get engagement right.
- They were fundamental: much of what they did ticked along in the background and was quietly effective.
- Their capabilities have helped create something larger than anticipated - which gets the faculty noticed and has spin-off benefits at other levels, for example a closer working relationship between the university and the Sheffield Teaching Hospitals (NHS) Foundation Trust.

Impact of the Life Festival and looking ahead

- Life Festival is the first faculty-wide "platform" for the Faculty of Medicine, Dentistry and Health. The experience of holding this event has helped show value in engagement more generally. At the same time the levels of staff enthusiasm for participating vary.
- In some ways, much depends on how the festival is perceived to have worked internally.

- This in turn will influence timing and nature of any future public engagement activities on this scale. Furthermore, for a future event to succeed it is expected to incorporate new material – and new university staff.

C. Participating academics' feedback

Expectations, enjoyment and skills

- Researchers and academics taking part in Life Festival had a lot of fun. **Most (18 out of 23) were undertaking such an event for the first time.**
- This enthusiasm is likely to reach others in the faculty, particularly as following participation academics were keen to recommend their colleagues taking part in a similar event.
- Taking part in an event tended to **exceed expectations**, particularly in terms of the audience's levels of interaction and interest. Enjoyment of the experience was heightened further by the academics being able to gauge and potentially increase the public awareness of their subject area using simple formats.
- While just a small number felt they had learned new skills many more believed that they gained in other areas from it, largely through reaching out to audiences beyond the university. This was especially true for events aimed at young people.

Support for public engagement

- The feedback on support for presenters from the Team is very good and this further reflects some of the faculty leaders' feedback about the guidance and support provided to participants.

Planning, organisation and media coverage

- While the selection process for academics and researchers getting involved as presenters was rated highly, the overall organisation of events could be better, including the way in which bookings are made.
- Those who noticed media reporting of their event saw this as encouraging and good for profile raising of departmental work. Online media news or blogs provided most coverage. There is potential for extending this in future especially given the appreciative comments on its value.

Views on public engagement and effect on research

- The outward benefits from public engagement tend very much to be seen in terms of the raising of departmental or research profiles and helping make the public more aware of the issues.
- As indicated in the findings from faculty leadership it is a little difficult to tell whether public engagement influences research. New ideas and feedback from these events appear to lead to beneficial effects for research, for example in helping the presenters become more accessible by pitching information at a different level.
- Following their participation in Life Festival **most respondents are now more positive about public engagement**, or have an unchanged view. The numerous appreciative comments and the high self-evaluation of presenters' abilities to explain their work further support a "feel good" effect.