

The Rural Touring Guide

How to Take Your
Show on the Road



National Rural
Touring Forum

About

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People who would never travel to the fringe to see a show and who may have little pre-interest in dance and experimental performance came to see it because it was in their village hall. Many people have a local theatre, but how many think of it as their theatre, I wonder?"

Lyn Gardner

The Stage (2025)

Introduction

Rural touring is one of the most unique and powerful ways of connecting artists with communities. It brings high-quality, professional work into village halls, pubs, libraries and community spaces, often in areas with little access to cultural activity.

What makes rural touring so special is the way it flips the traditional model. In urban venues, the artist invites the audience in. In rural touring, the audience invites the artist into their space. This creates a shared experience that is deeply personal and rooted in place.

It is a forward-thinking sector, leading the way in expanding access, growing new audiences, and demonstrating how touring can be truly inclusive. It is also a model of environmental responsibility, with shorter travel routes and shared infrastructure making it one of the most sustainable ways to tour.

This guide will help you understand how it works and why it matters. I am excited for you to discover the magic of rural touring.

Holly Lombardo

Director, National Rural Touring Forum (2018-2025)

Welcome to the wonderful world of rural touring! Whether you're new to the sector or familiar-but-would-value-a-refresher, this document is an invaluable guide to the most dynamic and rewarding creative experience you're likely to have.

Rural touring is built upon community: communities of artists and companies who value direct, idiosyncratic, personal audience interactions; communities of promoters who care about quality professional work that makes a cultural contribution to the life of their neighbourhood; communities of audiences who deserve and expect exhilarating artistic experiences; and communities of touring schemes and adjacent organisations who act as the connecting tissue between them all, through facilitating conversations, empowering decision-making, and helping bring great art to everyone, wherever they are.

In my experience, rural touring is the most progressive, resourceful, sustainable and socially-inclusive mode in which to make art. The rural touring network cares about society, and about each other, and thrives on ingenuity and collaboration. Leave your assumptions at the door and let your journey begin.

Elizabeth Freestone

Associate Director,
Royal Shakespeare Company

The Basics

What is Rural Touring?



Rural touring is the process of bringing professional live performances such as theatre, music, dance or comedy to community spaces like village halls, churches, pubs, libraries, schools and outdoor areas, in locations outside of the major urban settlements.

The approach connects artists with audiences in small, often remote communities, typically through a collaboration between touring schemes, local residents and professional performers.

The goal is to provide high-quality arts experiences for people that may not otherwise have access to these.



Bournemouth Symphony Orchestra Ensemble at Portesham Village Hall, credit Artsreach

“Rural touring is about bringing professional arts into isolated communities, whether it’s rural or not. Often people don’t have easy access to venues and don’t necessarily consider themselves arts attenders. They go to events out of curiosity, to support the local community, and they really like to see life in the place they live.”

Dawn Badland, Applause Rural Touring



Who is involved?



Artists/Companies

Professional touring artists or companies who have work appropriate to the specifications and needs of community venues and outdoor spaces.



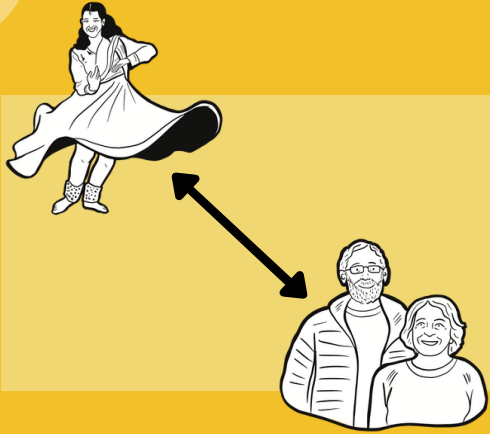
Community Promoters and Programmers

Sometimes known as hosts, these are groups of people living and/or working directly in communities, aiming (mostly voluntarily) to put on high-quality events and activities with and for their neighbours.



Audience Members

Audiences vary depending on location and the type of show. A traditional rural touring audience is often made up of people who are not typical or regular arts attendees, but attend to support their community, socialise with their friends, and have an enjoyable night out in their village or town. They are usually hyperlocal and travel short distances to the host venue.



Touring Schemes

Touring schemes act as a link and enabler between artists and promoters. They select a range of suitable work and present that as a 'menu' for community promoters to choose from, updating the selection at least every year. All schemes work slightly differently, with different sized teams and slightly different models.

With investment from funders like Arts Council England, Arts Council of Wales, Creative Scotland, The National Lottery and local authorities, schemes offer financial support to promoters in the form of subsidy, so that they can afford to host high quality work and artists can receive fair and proper pay.

Typical venues

From simple wooden huts with minimal plug sockets to brand new community centres, equipped with sound and lighting technology, each rural touring venue is unique. Some schemes have small arts centres or local theatres within their promoting network, but these are much rarer and not representative of standard rural touring venues which often:

Seat between 40-100 audience members

May not have a separate green room, box office, bar or loading bay

Have limited get-in time due to other daytime usage like pre-schools or Zumba

Are without a stage or lighting rig

Over the last decade, touring schemes have expanded the range of community spaces they partner with to include public spaces like libraries, pubs and outdoor areas. These spaces are rapidly becoming thriving and essential venues for hosting shows, engaging entirely new audiences beyond the traditional village hall setting.

Traditional village halls



Pubs



Small arts centres



Churches



Libraries



Schools



Outdoors spaces



How Does it Work?

There are a number of rural touring schemes operating across the UK. Though united by common goals, each scheme operates slightly differently.

However, most follow a similar pattern of operation, as shown here:

1 Artists apply to tour with a scheme

Artists and companies apply to each scheme individually to be featured in their selection menu for promoters. Schemes will usually ask for similar information about your company and the show to help them decide if it is right for their venues. Each scheme has its own application timeline; some offer a year-round rolling application process, others have specific application windows to watch for. Applying to a scheme does not guarantee your show will be included on a menu or booked by a promoter but it does provide an artist with wide visibility from a number of potential bookers.

Many schemes accept artist applications, curate their menus and manage the administration of their bookings via email or application forms, however online event management systems such as Eventotron are becoming increasingly common. Be sure to check how each scheme operates, as some may have cross over systems which can minimise your time as an artist applying.

Schemes curate menus

2

Programmers at each scheme will filter down the applications to curate a varied, high-quality menu of work for their promoters to choose from. This will include the information you have provided, along with other information about your show that the scheme thinks will be relevant to pass on to promoters. Programmers will do their research on the company by seeing the work wherever possible and/or liaising with other programmers.

3 Menus are sent to promoters

Promoters will spend time selecting the shows they would like to host in their venue, often meeting with their village hall committees or volunteer groups to help make the decision. Some schemes have a limit on how many shows a venue can book with subsidy per year or per season, so they are keen to ensure the show they select is suitable for their community. Some schemes host showcase days, where they bring promoters together either in person or online to talk through the work in each new menu, showing trailers or even inviting select artists to showcase excerpts of their work.

4 Artists and shows are selected

Once promoters have made a decision, they will contact the scheme and/or artist with the dates they would like to host their chosen show. Some schemes have booking windows in which promoters need to make their selections while others operate on an 'as and when' basis.

5 Bookings are confirmed

From here, there is often some back-and-forth to get all the details in place, such as confirming the date and time or organising consecutive dates if applicable. Once this is finalised, the scheme will raise a contract with the artist and the promoter.

6 Marketing the event

Then it's time to confirm ticket prices and box-office information and begin marketing the event! Some schemes ask for posters and flyers from the company which they can overprint with the specific promoter details, others create new bespoke marketing materials in partnership with the company. The scheme may then post the agreed amount of marketing materials to promoters who lead on the distribution across their community. In rural touring, word-of-mouth is the most successful marketing mechanism.

7 Hosting the event

On the day of the event, the venue will be opened for you by one or two (usually voluntary) promoters. Throughout the get-in, they will be joined by two to three others who will be tasked with setting out the seating, box office table and refreshments area or raffle, ready to welcome your audience.



“

Having high quality arts performances of all types in rural communities is critical where the nearest equivalent will often be at least one hour away by car and much further by public transport.”

Audience member, Dorset

Protein Dance, credit Take Art

Why Rural Tour?



“Rural touring is an incredible asset to artists of all genres, introducing them to a different type of audience and a different way of touring. Any artist who has not had the pleasure and experience of rural touring is definitely missing out!”

David Mynne, Performer

Head Wrap Diaries by Uchenna Dance, credit Trish Thompson

Artists love rural touring!

It can be very different to touring to traditional theatres or conventional arts venues in a unique and special way. Here are just a few reasons you might consider bringing your show to rural and community venues:



1 Connection with audiences

There is no other touring model which connects you quite as directly and immediately with audiences as performing in community spaces. It is a great opportunity to hear what audiences think – they usually love chatting to you after the show.

2 Guaranteed fees

It's becoming increasingly common for mainstream theatre venues to offer companies box office splits instead of guaranteed fees, which involves an element of risk as you never know what your take-home will be. Many rural touring schemes offer artists a guaranteed fee per show, so you can be safe in the knowledge that your contracted fee is the one you'll take home after performing.

3 Reaching different audiences

Rural touring audiences are less likely to frequent other arts and cultural spaces, which is one of the reasons why bringing high-quality work to them is so important. Reaching under-served audiences is a rewarding and progressive experience; it can inform the creation of new work and be beneficial for funding applications.

Rural touring provides more than just entertainment. It boosts wellbeing by reducing social isolation and strengthens communities by turning local venues into vibrant cultural spaces. It supports the local economy, generating income through ticket sales, hospitality, and increased footfall in the area. It supports the environment by reducing the need for audience members to take long car journeys to see exciting professional performances. With volunteers, artists, and touring schemes working together, rural touring creates meaningful, inclusive experiences right on people's doorsteps for the good of the community.



Night Out scheme audience members, credit Hazel Hannant

Reach

Each year, the rural touring sector typically represents:

25+

Member
schemes

2000+

Artists

2000+

Promoters

1400+

Venues

250,000+

Audience members

Over £1m

Box office sales

What to Expect



How does rural touring differ from other types of touring?

Hosting arts events in rural locations comes with a set of quirks which are good to be aware of in advance. These include:



Travel – Rural touring often involves travelling to remote locations or areas which can be hard to access via public transport. Phone signal may be limited, so ensure you're travelling in a suitable vehicle and have mapped out your routes and service stations in advance.



Accommodation – Whilst some promoters provide accommodation for artists, you should expect to arrange this yourself, often promoters know a good local B&B that can put you up. Be sure to check in with promoters in good time after contracting, in case they can offer any helpful suggestions.



Venue facilities – It's unlikely you'll have your own dressing room but promoters will aim to find you a suitable space within the venue to get ready, so you have some privacy before your performance.



Food – Many promoters are more than happy to ensure you're fed and watered during your visit, including sometimes providing a homecooked meal! Let them know your arrival time, refreshment preferences and any dietary requirements well in advance. It's also worth checking where the nearest shops or pubs are just in case!



Enthusiastic Promoters & Audiences – This show might be the only professional event this community has all year, and they've likely been planning it for months, so you can be sure they'll greet you with a warm welcome! Be sure to do the same and embrace their enthusiasm whilst you're staying and performing in their space. Promoters and audiences really appreciate the opportunity to talk to visiting artists about their work after the performance, but do make it clear what you are comfortable with ahead of time.



Why not visit a show happening at your nearest rural touring venue and see what it's all about? Speak to your local scheme to arrange a visit.

The background is a solid yellow color. It is decorated with several white, stylized cursive script patterns. These patterns are scattered across the page, appearing as if they are floating or falling. Some patterns are more complete, while others are partially cut off by the edges of the page. The patterns vary in size and orientation, adding a dynamic and artistic feel to the design.

Getting Started

Your Work



“ *Understanding, and a genuine commitment to the ethos of rural touring, is often more important – or as important – as having previous experience working in rural venues. However, the product is critical – it has to be top quality and appropriate because venues recognise quality, and they deserve it.”*

Sue Roberts, Artservice

When it comes to programming, schemes aim to curate a varied selection of performances suited to a variety of venues and audiences. This means considering a broad mix of:

Artform

Different types of performances thrive in different spaces. For instance, children's and family events work well in libraries, while theatre and music performances are a great fit for village halls. Schemes strive to offer a balanced mix, from entertaining, crowd-pleasing acts to more thought-provoking, ambitious pieces.

Key artforms include:



Theatre



Children's & Family Performances



Dance



Outdoor & Street Theatre



Music



Poetry, Spoken Word & Storytelling

Scale

Schemes look for a range of performance sizes, from intimate solo acts that might use only a free-standing spotlight to multi-performer ensembles with inventive, adaptable sets. This variety ensures promoters can choose acts that suit their specific needs, whether a small pop-up show for a daytime festival or a full-length evening production.

Cost

The price of your work can be a deciding factor in whether a scheme will put it on their menu, and whether a promoter will book it in their venue. The cost will usually relate to the scale of the show, and schemes will often present a variety of differently priced work to ensure there is something affordable for all promoters. If you're unsure if your work is priced correctly and accessible for rural touring, speak to schemes in advance of applying.



Lightwalkers by An Act Above in King's Lynn Town Centre, credit Gary Diggines

Planning touring costs

When pricing up your show, remember to think about all the costs associated with touring, this will usually include:



Accommodation

(depending on time of show and travel distance)



Living costs (e.g. expenses for meals)



Van hire, fuel and parking



Equipment hire



Consumables

(items you will use and replace as you tour)



Performers and technical crew fees

If you're unsure how much to pay your touring team or how to estimate travel and accommodation costs, start with the [Independent Theatre Council](#) guidelines. These provide minimum recommended rates to help ensure fair pay across the industry.

For shows with larger casts, those specifically designed for smaller audiences, or those travelling further distances, the cost of producing and touring can be higher per show than a touring scheme can usually cover. In these cases, you may need to secure additional funding (from Arts Council England, for example) to meet the full amount. If your tour dates depend on this funding, let the scheme know as early as possible. While provisional tour dates aren't confirmed until contracts are signed, they can still be used as valuable 'match-funding' if both you and the scheme are in agreement.

Some artists offer a reduced fee for consecutive bookings with the same scheme, based on the reduced travel costs of staying in one area for several nights. However, these bookings are usually not in the same venue, but across different community spaces within the designated area or 'patch'.

If you're just getting started with budgeting a tour, or need advice with scoping the costs or fundraising, the NRTF is there to help and you can [visit their website for more information](#).

Checklist for artists

Some schemes appreciate a digital tour pack, so they can clearly see all the details about your offer in one place. However, even if you don't have a digital tour pack, you'll need to have all the following information about your show to hand when applying or speaking to schemes:

Basic information and assets

- ☐ A synopsis about your show
- ☐ Key themes or selling points
- ☐ Trailers or filmed clips
- ☐ High-resolution show or marketing images
- ☐ Press reviews, quotes or audience feedback

Key requirements

- ☐ Running time
- ☐ Age suitability/target audience
- ☐ Get-in/get-out times
- ☐ Minimum performance space (height, width, depth)
- ☐ Technical requirements (ideally self-sufficient)

Additional information

- ☐ Enhanced offer – Workshops, Q&A, special intro
- ☐ Accessibility – Perhaps your show has integrated sign language or is particularly suited to neurodivergent audiences
- ☐ Show fee (including VAT, travel and accommodation)



[Click here to download your own Tour Pack template](#)

Getting a Gig

Once you've got your show ready to go, you can use the NRTF website to locate the various member schemes operating across the country, and then you can visit their websites to find out how to apply!

You can also join the NRTF as a member, and have direct access to their programmer contact list, menu timelines and more.

[Click here to visit the NRTF website](#)



National Rural
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Illustration by Emily O'Shea, 2025

Bookings & Events

You're Booked



What happens once your show has been booked by a promoter?

Though each scheme has its own process, once your booking is confirmed you will usually receive a contract to sign before ironing out any on-the-day logistics with the promoter or scheme in advance of the event. This is often where the promoter's contact details are passed on. The contract will confirm your fee and the scheme's cancellation policy, so it's important to read this carefully and raise any questions as soon as possible.

Need help with marketing? The NRTF offers media and PR support for schemes, touring companies, venues, and artists. Find out more on the [NRTF website](#).

Event Marketing

Once the event is booked and confirmed, it's time to start marketing! Your tour pack may already include useful marketing assets for the scheme and promoter, but if not, it's highly beneficial to have a marketing pack or assets ready to share.

In rural areas, event promotion relies heavily on printed posters, flyers, social media posts and local event listings. Word of mouth is also a powerful tool, so providing high-quality materials can significantly boost interest and attendance (and also help you get booked in the first place).



It's important to note that schemes offer varying levels of marketing support. While some have in-house marketing teams, many do not. In these cases, supplying high-quality poster templates for overprinting can be especially valuable.

Payment

Payment works differently across the schemes. In most instances, the scheme pays you the agreed fee after the performance, on receipt of an invoice. This information should form part of your contract or accompanying information.

Ideal assets to provide:

- Poster and flyer templates or access to design files for schemes to edit
- Production or rehearsal photos
- Trailers or behind the scenes videos
- Press, reviews, quotes or feedback

It's Showtime

As your event approaches, this suggested timeline may be helpful to follow...



Touch base with the promoter to discuss final arrangements such as:

- **Checking ticket sales** – It helps to know what to expect and can guide your setup or interaction style.
- **Clarifying venue details** – Get a clear description or floor plan if needed, and double-check key tech info: power, lighting, blackouts, sound setup, sight lines, and space for your set if needed.
- **Confirming timings** – Start and finish time, interval (especially if there's food), and anything that might affect your run time.



- **Arrive on time** – You'll have arranged a suitable time with the promoter but we'd recommend you leave a good couple of hours to get set up.
- **Be friendly and flexible** – The promoter may be new to rural touring as well so work with them to set up, check timings and discuss if an introduction or 'thank you' speech is appropriate.
- **Stay present and adaptable** – Things might not go exactly to plan. That's part of the charm. Remember you're not just performing; you're a guest in the community. Be warm, sociable and respectful.
- **Enjoy it** – Rural touring is full of surprises. Embrace the quirks and have a brilliant show!
- **Give thanks** – Take the opportunity to recognise everyone who helped make the event possible, including the promoter or venue host, your audience and the touring scheme too.



After your show, you can expect a curious audience who'll want to chat, share feedback, and maybe peek behind the scenes. The local team will be tidying up - stacking chairs, doing the dishes - and might even offer a hand with your pack-down. Take your time, enjoy the moment, and be part of the community you've just performed for.



Many touring schemes have a formal feedback process for both you and the promoters, often requiring specific information to be shared with funders. If you'd like to learn more about the feedback received, you will need to contact the scheme directly.

“

The promoter was absolutely over the moon with the turnout especially as they have never had a show in this community centre before and she came up against some initial resistance from the centre committee members. After the incredible reaction and positive feedback from the audience, she is now very keen to have more Night Out events here."

Circo Rum Ba Ba

Important Considerations

Think Green

The Theatre Green Book is an essential guide for creating environmentally sustainable productions and tours. It provides practical advice on building eco-friendly shows, covering key aspects like sustainable materials, food, recycling, and travel. By using this resource, you can make informed decisions to reduce your environmental impact and ensure that both the production process and the touring experience are as sustainable as possible.

[Click here to view The Theatre Green Book](#)



Don Quixote by Bicycle, Burn the Curtain at Fremington Quay

Accessibility & Inclusivity

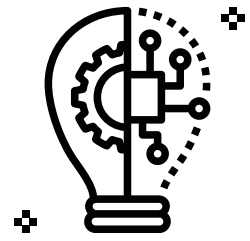
When developing a show, it's worth thinking about accessibility and inclusion early on and exploring what practical steps you can take to ensure your work can be experienced by a broad range of audiences. This might involve creating work that speaks to or includes underrepresented communities and ensuring a range of stories and voices are reflected on stage.

Offering touch tours for visually impaired audiences, integrating BSL or signing, and using creative captioning are just some of the ways to make performances more accessible. By being proactive and thoughtful, artists can help make rural touring more inclusive, relevant, and engaging for everyone.



Squashbox Theatre at Stalbridge Village Hall, credit Jayne Jackson

New Technologies



While rural touring remains rooted in tradition, you may like to explore and embrace new technologies when creating and sharing your work. This should ideally be done in collaboration with a scheme or promoters to ensure it is fit for purpose. You may consider utilising tools like AI for creative development or VR for immersive experiences. Live streaming and event recordings can extend the reach of performances beyond physical venues, while creative captioning and other digital access tools help make shows more inclusive. However, always bear in mind that access to reliable Wi-Fi and broadband is a regular challenge experienced by rural communities, so digital approaches should be planned with these limitations in mind.



The Magic Sandbox, interactive installation by Collusion

International Artists



The opportunity to tour to rural communities and other small-scale spaces is often available to international artists and many schemes are open to and experienced in supporting international artists across their networks.

The practical details of each international tour are particular to the context of the visiting artist, however overarching considerations for international touring to the UK include:

Funding and fundraising

It is the responsibility of the visiting artist to generate the necessary funds to support their international tour, however UK schemes can support this by providing in principle match-funding through 'pencilled' dates with promoters. To generate this kind of commitment, artists should contact schemes at least 12-18 months in advance of their planned visit.

Network of contacts to build a tour

Rural touring schemes are well connected and collaborative. If a scheme is hosting an international artist, they are usually very happy to help open up the touring offer to neighbouring schemes and other partners across the country. Do not be afraid to ask if they will help to generate more dates or act as a liaison between you and other partners.

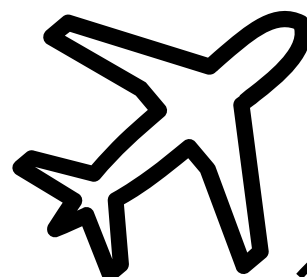
Work permits and visas

International artists must have the correct documentation in place before visiting the UK for work.

[Click here to find out more about the appropriate permits and visas.](#)

Flights, accommodation and local transport

These are the administrative and financial responsibility of the visiting artist. Often rural touring schemes work with promoters far away from urban centres, meaning that transport links to and from an airport are limited. Often there is a need for car/van hire with rural touring in the UK.



Further Reading

Articles

'Village halls can help theatre rethink its connection to audiences'

- Lyn Gardner, *The Stage* (2025)

'It takes a village: should we be paying greater attention to rural shows?'

- Lyn Gardner, *The Stage* (2023)

'I'm a convert to no-frills rural touring – it deserves our respect'

- Ben Duke, *The Stage* (2020)

'Rural touring could offer the quickest route out of lockdown'

- Lyn Gardner, *The Stage* (2020)

'Not cosy, not safe, no tractors: the plays redefining rural theatre'

- Lyn Gardner, *The Guardian* (2016)

Resources

A Wider Horizon: Creative Arts East and Rural Touring

- Francois Matarasso

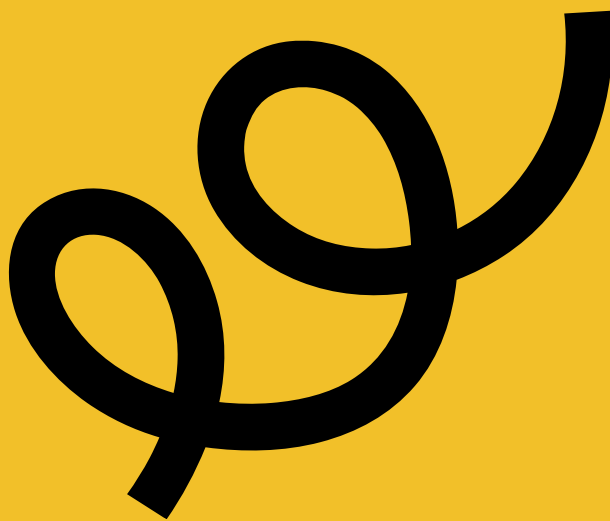
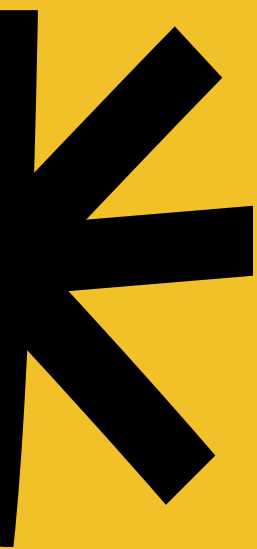
Artist's Guide and Libraries Information Resource at AMACultureHive

Websites

Action with Communities in Rural England

National Rural Touring Forum

Take Art Rural Touring Model Carbon Assessment



National Rural
Touring Forum



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