Being Human festival FAQs

How is the Being Human festival run?

Being Human is run by a team based at the School of Advanced Study, University of London (SAS) – the UK’s national centre for the promotion and support of humanities research. It runs in partnership with the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) and the British Academy (BA), two of the largest public bodies dedicated to supporting humanities research and researchers in the UK. These partners fund the festival along with SAS and provide support and oversight. The central team at SAS undertake all the central management and promotion of Being Human, and it is this team that you will be in touch with if you take part in the festival.

Is Being Human festival affected by the Covid-19 pandemic?

In light of the challenges and restrictions posed by the Covid-19 pandemic, in 2020 many festival events and projects moved online, were presented digitally, or ran in hybrid formats. Being Human festival 2021 will take place 11-20 November. To enable planning to begin, we are committing to a hybrid-delivery festival this November that combines the best of online engagement with safe in-person activities. Together we will build on the best elements of Being Human 2020 to offer a national festival of public engagement taking place both in-person and online. Although digital delivery helped expand the festival’s horizons, it will continue to champion its core principles: Being Human remains a place-based festival that emphasises interaction, working with communities outside academia and those less typically engaged with humanities culture (people who might not normally go to a public university event, or an exhibition in an art gallery, for example). Whether digital, or in-person (socially distanced), we will support innovative, participatory, and creative activities that foster genuine, two-way connections with people not usually engaged with academic research. As ever, events should be designed to facilitate mutual learning between researchers and publics.

What do you mean by ‘hybrid’ event?

A hybrid event makes the most of both online and in-person delivery. This might mean, for example, that an event is presented to a small audience in-person and is also live streamed. It could mean a project that has both in-person, physical elements as well as digital/online experiences. For instance, a materials kit that is posted out to participants ahead of an online workshop, or a community based public art installation that also has a website where audiences can engage and share their ideas. We encourage organisers to think creatively about how to make online events as interactive and engaging as possible, to enable effective two-way engagement.

What are your definitions of ‘humanities research’?

The festival uses a broad definition of the humanities, which encompasses the subject areas traditionally associated with the study of the human world. This includes, for example, art history, archaeology, classics, cultural studies, history, film, languages, literature, musicology, philosophy, theatre studies, theology, etc. Art practice would not typically fall under this definition but projects
from practitioners have been included in the festival before if they have a strong humanities research component and offer a good fit the festival’s objectives. Similarly, interdisciplinary projects with artists, social scientists and scientists are very welcome providing they have a strong humanities base.

What do you mean by ‘professional researcher’? (and why does every event need to have one?)

Being Human festival is all about fostering connections to publicly funded research in the humanities. We want to demystify humanities research and make it clearer to people what it is, who does it, why it is relevant and who it is for. It’s therefore really important that people get to encounter and speak to professional researchers in the humanities at our events. We include in our definition university lecturers and researchers (at any career stage), PhD students, curators and research librarians. Whilst we very much welcome participation in events from creative practitioners, independent scholars, local history groups and citizen researchers, it is important that these perspectives are included in addition to, rather than as a replacement for, professional researchers of the kind outlined above.

What do you mean by ‘public engagement’?

All of the events in our programme offer some form of public engagement with humanities research. This means, essentially, that they take specialist knowledge in the humanities (in classics or philosophy, for example) and share it in ways that have been specifically designed to be appealing and engaging for a non-specialist audience. This means shaping the activity that audience’s needs, interests and enthusiasms. At their best, such activities are mutually beneficial both for researchers and for the public – establishing a ‘two-way street’ model of engagement.

What do you mean by a ‘public audience’?

Our definition of a non-specialist, public audience (at whom all festival activities should be aimed) is an audience who do not have a current, formal relationship with a Higher Education Institutions (HEI) or Independent Research Organisations (IRO) (e.g. staff or students at a university), and who do not have ‘specialist’ knowledge of a humanities research area. Audiences may have no prior interest in the humanities, or may have an existing interest in an aspect of humanities research. Whilst your audience might be interested in history on the level of going to museums or watching TV documentaries, for example, they would not typically have an advanced knowledge of the latest research and innovations in the field of historical research.

How do I interest a public audience in my research?

A better way to think about this is: ‘how might my research align with an audience’s existing interests and enthusiasms?’ It is very unlikely that you will develop an audience entirely from scratch, or persuade people to be interested in something they have previously shown no inclination towards. It is better to connect your research to something people are already passionate about and spend their leisure time doing. Does your research touch on an area in which there is strong existing public interest (e.g. sport, food and drink, music, literature, film, theatre, etc)? Can it be matched to a format that people will find fun and engaging? Can you engage with existing fan communities, clubs or societies? Remember that non-specialist audiences typically don’t find highly specialised talks and lectures rewarding in the same way that fellow specialists do.
What support is provided for organisers?

In addition to providing a limited number of funding grants, Being Human is committed to supporting everyone taking part in the festival. The festival team offer advice and guidance to organisers, and also make available resources to give activities the best possible chance of success.

Specifically, we provide the following:

- A training “Masterclass” series run throughout the festival year for practical advice with designing, planning, promotion and delivery of your project
- Public engagement toolkits, resources and helpful advice from the festival team
- Guides to promoting your event that contain hints and tips about marketing and press
- Copies of Being Human print and digital materials geared towards promoting the national festival and access to other marketing materials (e.g. banners and badges) to promote your activity
- Templates you can use to produce your own marketing materials (posters, banners, digital and PowerPoint templates etc.)
- Support from the central Being Human social media accounts

Being Human organisers also have access to specially arranged training events, and may be invited to take part in centrally organised festival activities.

Will Being Human promote my activity?

Being Human promotes the festival as a whole in the media, on social media, and by producing a central online programme and print materials. As above, it also produces and makes available materials to help organisers promote activities locally. Please note however that as a national festival taking place in multiple locations across the UK, we are necessarily limited in the amount of central marketing support that we can give to individual organisers and events. To make the most of participating in the festival, it is therefore essential that all organisers think carefully about the likely appeal of an activity to the specific audience that they are trying to connect with, how best to reach that audience using the resources available, and how to manage time effectively in order to properly promote an activity. Ultimately, activities will only succeed if organisers take responsibility for promoting them themselves.

Can Being Human get my research/festival activity media coverage?

We can’t guarantee that being part of the festival will result in you receiving media interest in your festival activity or your research. However, we do work hard to maximise the visibility of all activities and provide training and support to help organisers stand the best possible chance of securing media attention for themselves (for example by providing template press releases). Some examples of previous media coverage garnered by the festival are available on our website. Whilst there is no hard-and-fast-formula to guarantee media interest, the press are typically more interested in activities that shed genuinely new light on topics already in the news; that are particularly unusual and innovative in their format; or that unveil new and exciting research discoveries.

Why is a cultural/community partner important?

Choosing the right partner can be crucial to an activity’s success so it is important to think about this carefully. Examples of partners could include an arts organisation, museums and galleries (including university-run museums), collectives, community organisations, libraries and archives. Cultural partners could also be, for example, a local craft or writers’ group.

When thinking of approaching partners to collaborate with, we recommend:
• selecting partners who really add value to events or make meaningful contributions (e.g. allowing you to engage with new audiences and communities)
• using partners’ connections and networks to promote events, but not relying on them to do all the work
• creating genuine partnerships that allow for co-production, rather than simply using venues for marketing/venue purposes.

The most successful partnerships generate mutual benefit for all concerned. This is often achieved by involving partners in the planning of an activity from an early stage (for example offering them a place on planning committees) rather than by simply relying on them to supply a venue.

Can Being Human help me find a cultural partner?

Unfortunately, we cannot help to match-make applications with potential partners. Details of organisations who have participated in previous years can be found by looking through our programmes [available online] or by talking to colleagues locally who have participated in previous years. It is worth bearing in mind that your organisation may already have established community partners for off-campus/off-site events even if you have not worked with them before. It may be worth exploring options here with colleagues, in public engagement, widening participation, outreach or other relevant departments within your organisation to see if they can help.

How can I make sure my activity reaches a significant number of people?

We are obviously keen that the festival reaches the largest possible audience, and that each separate activity makes as much impact as possible. This is particularly important for activities supported by grants from the festival, but is good practice across the board. Whilst we recognise that some activities may have good reason to limit capacity, there are sometimes ways around this. For example very small walking tours or workshops might run several times, or an event that was conceived as a one-off performance might be supplemented by spin-off activities such as school workshops. An activity that is ambitious and ‘risky’ might be supplemented with an activity that has a guaranteed audience (e.g. a walk-up stall in a space with a high footfall).

Can I charge an entry fee for my Being Human event?

No, all activities featured in the festival need to be completely free to attend (please note that all activities need to be free, not just those funded by Being Human). This includes free access to venues where events are being held (such as heritage sites or museums that charge an entrance fee). This is in line with the festival’s ethos of making humanities research accessible to the broadest possible audience.

I’ve missed the application deadline. Can I still take part?

If you are applying for funding, there is unfortunately no ‘wiggle room’ whatsoever around our deadlines. However, if you have a high-quality event or activity that does not require financial support, there is a later application deadline, and we are occasionally prepared to look at submissions even beyond that for activities to be included in our online listings. Please note though that consideration of late activities is entirely at the discretion of the festival team and there is no guarantee that late submissions will be considered.

I am not based in the UK. Can I apply to take part?

Being Human is primarily a UK based festival, and funding is currently only available to support activities in the UK. However, each year we do include a number of international activities in the
programme that fit the festival’s ethos and can run without financial support. Examples of this strand of activity in previous festivals can be found here. If you are not based in the UK, but have an idea for a strong activity that you think matches the festival’s aims, by all means get in touch.

What will I get out of organising a Being Human activity?

Organising a Being Human activity can be challenging, but organisers (as shown in our festival evaluations) typically find the process rewarding. The main benefits that people have articulated include the festival:

- acting as a catalyst to get a project up and running which wouldn’t otherwise have happened;
- acting as an opportunity to engage with a new audience and get refreshing new perspectives on research;
- providing an opportunity to get public engagement advice and support that is not available at their own institution;
- offering an opportunity to work with new cultural partners or develop an existing relationship;
- providing opportunities to make contacts and start collaborations with other researchers nationally;
- providing an opportunity to raise visibility of their research nationally and within their own institution.

Further examples can be found in the case studies section of our website.

How is the festival evaluated?

The festival is evaluated annually and independently by an external company using data gathered by organisers across the country. All organisers are expected to play a part in festival evaluation in order to ensure that the festival improves year on year and continues to meet the criteria against which it is funded. All evaluation reports on the festival from 2014 onwards are publicly available online.