

Lottery boost for local heritage projects

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Ambitious plans by the friends of Portaferry Presbyterian Church to restore this building were recognised with the award of a £935,700 grant, while ArtsEkta's project to explore and record the shared heritage of the South Asian and indigenous communities in Northern Ireland received a £117,300 boost.

Commenting on the announcement, Head of HLF Northern Ireland, Paul Mullan, said: "We know that projects like the ones benefiting from our latest investment can have a huge impact on local communities. They aid regeneration, create opportunities for people to get involved through volunteering and transform perceptions by enabling people to learn more about their own or other people's heritage.

"The plans to conserve and breathe new life into Portaferry Presbyterian Church, and ArtsEkta's proposals to explore the shared heritage of the South Asian and indigenous communities of Northern Ireland, will undoubtedly reap many benefits for local people and we are delighted to confirm more than £1million in funding to support these two very different projects."

Portaferry Presbyterian Church, a grade A listed building of national importance is one of the finest examples of the Greek Revival style building in Great Britain and Ireland. Built in 1841, building has served one of the oldest congregations in Ireland which was formed as part of the Army Presbytery in 1642.

The new project will involve a programme of urgent, conservation-led repairs to restore and safeguard the building. Repairs will be made to the roof and windows, and key details such as the historic paint scheme, including the Greek Revival stencilling and marbling, will be reinstated.

The restoration of the building will play a pivotal role in the regeneration of Portaferry and the wider area. It will act as a focus for community activities and events, hosting an enhanced programme of concerts and arts events in celebration of the strong musical heritage of area. The building will include a dedicated exhibition space which will house permanent and travelling exhibitions raising awareness of the diverse social, economic and environmental histories of the Upper Ards and Strangford Lough.

Welcoming the award, Ian McDonnell from the friends of Portaferry Presbyterian Church, said: "This is a huge vote of confidence by HLF for our vision for this building – one of the UK's finest examples of the Greek Revival period. We can now restore this unique and beautiful building and open it up as a 'one-stop' centre where everyone can explore the vast wealth of historical artefacts and access the heritage and genealogy of the Upper Ards. We will also continue to stage and expand our promotion of the arts and culture through concerts, talks and travelling displays opening up the building for use not only by the local Presbyterian Community but by all members of the local community and the many people who visit our region every year."

Funding was also awarded to the Sanskriti project which will explore the rich shared diverse heritage of the South Asian and indigenous communities of Northern Ireland through a three year programme of inspiring and participatory activities. These will be focused around the themes of migration and trade, from the 1920s to the present day; national and cultural identity; and traditional rites and practices such as births, marriages and deaths.

A key element of the activity will be an oral history research project. Fifteen volunteers will be recruited and trained in oral history techniques so they can conduct interviews and record data relating to the main themes of the project. A number of community groups and organisations including Asian Over 50 Club, Sikh Community of Derry, Women United, Forward Focus, Shankill's Women's Group and ArtsEkta young women's group, will be involved in the project by contributing their personal histories for the archive. The oral history research will be delivered with support and guidance from the Ulster Folk and Transport Museum. The completed archive will be lodged at the museum as part of the NI Oral History Archive to ensure the material is safeguarded for future and current generations to access and learn from.

A programme of talks, workshops and seminars will also be developed to encourage and involve members of all communities in the project. These activities, along with the creation of a dedicated project website and travelling exhibition, will help to promote a deeper learning and understanding of this shared heritage.

Nisha Tandon, Director of ArtsEkta, said: "We are very grateful to HLF for providing us with substantial principal funding to implement this exciting project. ArtsEkta is committed to the development of heritage projects that promote and tell the stories of local communities providing a legacy that can be accessed and appreciated by future generations to come. The project entered a very ambitious development phase last year and we are delighted that we have been selected to take our plans forward."