

Why engaging young people in heritage is key to levelling up

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Authors	Blamire, Joshua;Elkington, Rob
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Why Engaging Young People in Heritage is Key to Levelling Up

Dr Joshua Blamire and Rob Elkington of the University of Wolverhampton discuss their work exploring young people's engagements with heritage.

In recent years there have been clear signs of increasing interest in heritage among young people across informal and extracurricular settings such as social media and in the street. Meanwhile, recent investments in the heritage sector – such as the *National Lottery Heritage Fund's* [Kick the Dust](#) programme – have sought to better engage diverse groups of young people with 'heritage' as well as to make the sector more inclusive and accessible for young people.

Despite this, existing evidence is thin in regard to the precise outcomes that an engagement with heritage can produce for young people, the communities in which they live, and society as a whole. In 2021, [Historic England](#) commissioned [Arts Connect](#) and the [Institute for Community Research and Development](#) – both at the University of Wolverhampton – to investigate and report on these issues.

Our research was given additional urgency by the UK Government's Levelling Up White Paper and demands for publicly funded bodies to respond to this renewed focus on place, particularly those that are described in policy discourse as being 'left behind'. In this context, better articulating the role and value of heritage in generating positive social, economic, and health outcomes is vital if it is to inform future activities, influence public policy, and better make the case for public investment into the heritage sector.



Figure 1: Young Participants at the [Young People's Showcase](#), Birmingham, October 2022 (Arts Connect, 2022)

After producing a literature review we examined **seven young people’s heritage projects** across England using qualitative research methods (see Table 1 below). This involved conducting project-specific bespoke workshops and semi-structured interviews with young people and adult project coordinators, as well as observing some activities and speaking informally to young people through what we call ‘ethnographic participant observation’ (for instance, we attended a museum visit, a boat trip, and a three-day heritage crafts residential course).

The projects include [Stand Out](#) – an LGBTQ+ based heritage project run by a team of young producers aged 13–25 living in Burnley – the [Bright Sparks/Wild Sparks](#) who explore heritage crafts, and [Connecting with Yemeni Elders’ Heritage](#) which saw National Museums Liverpool working with a range of community partners to research and co-curate culturally relevant material for their dementia app. While distinct, each project utilised heritage in diverse ways to address social exclusion, foster social cohesion, enhance health and wellbeing, and improve the lives of young people. We also met participants from a range of other projects at a [Young People’s Research Showcase](#) event, such as [British Ceramics Biennial](#), (Stoke on Trent) and Heritage Lincolnshire.

Table 1: Heritage Case Studies

Heritage Group	Location
Adventurers History Club	East London
Connecting with Yemeni Elders’ Heritage	Liverpool
Hope Streets (Curious Minds)	Manchester/North West
Ignite Yorkshire (IVE)	Leeds
Nacro Education Centre Boston	Lincolnshire
Stand Out (Blaze Arts)	Burnley
Wild Sparks	North Yorkshire

We offer four key findings:

(1) Young people’s participation in heritage contributes to a range of personal development outcomes (such as increased knowledge and interpersonal skills). The seven projects examined are brimming with possibilities for young people’s development, although this is simply the **tip of the iceberg** for heritage potential.

(2) Heritage engagement offers unique opportunities by which to foster **identity and belonging**; giving young people the chance to re-interpret and re-present the places in which they live. This aligns with current Levelling Up policy ambitions to cultivate a sense of community, local pride, and belonging in deprived places. Take for instance the words of a young participant living in Stoke-on-Trent:

“I do feel very proud to be from this area. So I used to have a quite a strong Stoke accent that’s seemed to vanish because I was quite conscious of it when I was a bit younger. I was like ‘oh, I don’t want people to think I’m from, you know, a common place’ [laughs], but that’s really stupid and now I’m sad that I don’t have that because I say I’m from Stoke and people are like ‘oh, really?’, and I’m kind of sad about that. I’m very proud of my heritage and I like seeing the positive changes that are going on around this area”

[...]

“I think part of it is that I just...I’m a bit of a home bird, I do like sort of living around this area and I’ve got my family here, [so] part of it is that and then I think part of it is just because.. I grew up with all this history and heritage around me that I can’t really imagine going to somewhere. It sounds like really old fashioned to say but I can’t imagine going somewhere that’s not industrial [laughs] because I’ve always like lived and worked in this area that the sort of old industry is very much part of all of the history. I’ve learnt about it, and not having that would be a bit strange, and I think that’s why I’d like to sort of stay”

Heritage allows young people to view places in new ways, explore new forms of identity and belonging, and to establish new networks of friends and collaborators.

(3) Participating in heritage programmes can help those involved to **confront barriers that lead to social exclusion**, and can also make telling contributions towards building **strong cohesive communities**.

(4) Heritage can **promote social mobility**, and may also **provide a model** through which young people are equipped to stay in so-called ‘left behind’ places, to stake a claim to them, and contribute towards their revival.



Figure 2: *Stand Out's* Young Producers Share their Work (Arts Connect, 2022)

Our **recommendations** to practitioners, funders and policymakers are that:

A) Young people should be invited to explore aspects of their own heritage and/or that which they themselves consider to be important. They should also be engaged in the **coproduction of activities** from the outset, and empowered to define their own visions for heritage (with the guidance of heritage experts).

(B) The most transformative work focuses not only upon youth outcomes but also diverse groups of people as well as families, neighbourhoods, communities, schools, and other stakeholders. In particular, approaches which embrace both the **intercultural** and **intergenerational** aspects of heritage activities are particularly powerful and should be favoured in future project design. Such work also demonstrates effective value for money.

(C) Proposed activities should demonstrate meaningful commitments to **partnership-working** evidencing how programmes will work with non-heritage organisations within education, libraries, housing, transport and healthcare sectors. This is vital in order to share learning, to build community capacity, and ensure that the broader societal benefits of the programme are maximised. One emerging policy arena which might effectively harness this potential is **social prescribing**.

What role do archivists have to play?

Despite the relatively significant resources that have been invested in young people over the years, it is perhaps surprising that no central point for holding data about these activities exists. Our fourth recommendation is therefore that (D) grant proposals should commit to better capturing the outcomes of such work. It ought to be a **prerequisite of funding** to evaluate activities in accordance with **consistent patterns of measuring and reporting** in order that this learning is not lost. In the interests of transparency, this should be combined with the establishment of a **publicly and remotely accessible national central archive** which collates details of programmes' activities and outcomes. Such a policy would improve decision-making and accountability, better grow the evidence base, and support further research into new areas. For instance, it is still unclear as to how long any outcomes might persist, and what impacts and legacies of youth engagement continue into the longer-term. On this point, archivists have a considerable role to play in addition to their unique contribution as stewards and curators of heritage assets.

You can access the **full report** and a wider range of material arising from the project including blogs, videos and further resources [here](#).

If you'd like to learn more, please contact the authors:

Dr Joshua Blamire (Research Associate, ICRD) j.blamire@wlv.ac.uk

Rob Elkington (Director, Arts Connect) rob.elkington@wlv.ac.uk