

## Young people's engagements with heritage: tackling inequality & other opportunities for public policy

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## 2 Young people's engagements with heritage: tackling inequality & other opportunities for public policy

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## **Abstract**

Despite recent investment within the sector, still little is known about young people's engagements with heritage programmes and activities that are informal, extracurricular, and place-based. In this paper, we argue that understanding the role and value of heritage in generating positive social, economic, and health outcomes, as well as to social infrastructure, is vital in order to inform public policy, and to better make the case for public investments into the heritage sector. Drawing on research conducted by the Institute for Community Research and Development and Arts Connect on behalf of Historic England, the paper examines two youth-driven place-based heritage projects in North West England that utilised heritage to address social exclusion as well as to improve the health and wellbeing of young people.

A range of positive outcomes – such as personal development for young people, opportunities for fostering a sense of identity and belonging, participation that builds stronger and more cohesive communities, and social mobility – align to contemporary policy ambitions to cultivate 'pride in place'. The activities produced fundamentally new spaces of engagement and interaction for communities of people across diverse ethnic, religious, gender, sexual and generational identities. The programmes place heritage squarely within the realm of social and cultural infrastructure, which has key implications for policymaking. The projects also demonstrate how 'Levelling Up' can work through targeted government spending – rather than any largescale policy instruments – that nourishes and sustains place-appropriate forms of social and cultural infrastructure, in turn revitalising communities.

**Keywords:** young people, culture, heritage, place, health and wellbeing

## **Introduction**

Broadly speaking, social and cultural infrastructures encompass the wide range of spaces, services and structures working together within a place to enable communities to function, to form regular and meaningful social connections, and to flourish. There has been growing interest in the concept within recent years, with policymakers keen to better understand the role and potential for these infrastructures in helping to address the ongoing challenges presented by austerity, the implications of Brexit, the pandemic, the shift to net zero, and the cost-of-living crisis. Meanwhile, the UK Government's policy commitment to 'Level Up' the country grasps that economic policies alone are insufficient for addressing the associated regional and place-based inequalities, particularly in so-called 'left behind' places, nor for restoring "a sense of community, local pride and belonging, especially in those places where they have been lost"<sup>1</sup>.

This paper presents new evidence gathered by the authors, working with Historic England<sup>2</sup>, during a wider research project that explored young people's engagements with heritage. Focusing on two youth-driven place-based heritage projects in North West England, we demonstrate how their activities produced fundamentally new spaces of engagement and interaction for communities of people across diverse ethnic, religious, gender, sexual and generational identities, and particularly for some of society's most marginalised groups. In so doing, we extend ideas about what might be thought of as social and cultural infrastructures to new areas of consideration that have implications for policymaking. We examine the distinct role played by heritage, and of exploring the heritage(s) of people in place, in shaping these novel forms of social interaction. The findings should encourage politicians, policymakers, civil society leaders and communities to consider the value and importance of collaboration and partnership-working among diverse stakeholders at local, regional, and national scales, and to promote new social and economic investments into the public realm through which to strengthen the UK's social and cultural fabric and to address long-standing geographic inequalities in order to achieve just and equitable forms of 'Levelling Up'.

<sup>1</sup> HM Government, 2022: xviii.

<sup>2</sup> Historic England is the non-departmental public body, sponsored by the Department for Culture, Media and Sport, that helps people care for, enjoy, and celebrate England's historic environment.

We first introduce the research with Historic England before discussing the two case studies. Next, we critically consider their role as distinct forms of social and cultural infrastructure, and reflect upon how these activities might inform public policy. Finally, we conclude by offering recommendations as to how future policy interventions might support the flourishing of these novel spaces of engagement. We argue that 'Levelling Up' can work through targeted government spending – rather than any largescale policy instruments – that nourishes and sustains place-appropriate forms of social and cultural infrastructure, in turn revitalising communities. There is also scope for widening fledgling place-based social prescribing models to incorporate novel forms of innovative heritage activity.

## Exploring Young People's Engagements with Heritage

Despite considerable investment into the sector, little is known about young people's engagements with heritage, particularly with place-based and extracurricular projects that sit outside of the remit of formal education and heritage venues. Although there is a well-established body of literature concerning the benefits of arts-related activities for young people<sup>3</sup>, the evidence base for heritage is limited. Meanwhile, among a range of practical barriers, research has identified a paucity of youth-friendly activities within heritage spaces, combined with a widespread perception among young people that heritage venues do not tell stories that are relevant to them<sup>4</sup>. Those from minority ethnic groups, the socio-economically disadvantaged, and those with disabilities are the most excluded within these spaces. In response, some scholars and heritage practitioners have advocated for a fresh critical pedagogical approach that empowers young people from diverse ethnic and class backgrounds to explore and to celebrate the meanings of their own lived experiences within cultural and heritage institutions<sup>5</sup>. Such viewpoints see young people as highly-engaged political subjects capable of defining their own claims as to what counts as heritage<sup>6</sup>, and of instigating social change. Yet, the broader role of these heritage projects in building social and cultural infrastructure, and their significance for delivering on policy goals, was hitherto unclear.

Concurrently, contemporary policy contexts necessitate heritage organisations to accelerate their ongoing transitions from being predominantly interested in heritage to more holistic offers related to health and wellbeing, with for instance the potential to support social prescribing<sup>7</sup>. This policy involves linking service users to non-clinical statutory services, voluntary sector organisations, and community groups in order to improve their health and wellbeing. Understanding the role and value of heritage in generating positive socioeconomic and health outcomes, tackling place-based inequalities, and contributing to 'Levelling Up' is vital in order to inform future activities, to influence public policy, and to better advocate for public investments into the heritage sector.

Working with Historic England<sup>8</sup>, we examined seven young people's projects across diverse areas of England that each utilise heritage to address social exclusion, to enhance health and wellbeing, and to improve the lives of young people. We found that, first, participation in these programmes contributed to multiple positive personal, social, health, and learning benefits for the young people involved. Second, these place-based engagements with heritage offered unique opportunities for fostering identity and belonging, and empowering those young people to re-interpret and re-present the places where they live. Third, these activities can contribute to building stronger cohesive communities. Fourth, these opportunities can play a crucial role in promoting social mobility, and persuading young people to remain resident in so-called 'left behind' places: bringing together their renewed sense of belonging combined with the key skills, local networks, and creative impulse to socially and economically revive

<sup>3</sup> Matarasso, 1997; Konlaan et al., 2000; Fancourt and Finn, 2019.

<sup>4</sup> Manchester and Pett, 2015; Ecclesiastical, 2020.

<sup>5</sup> Habib, 2021.

<sup>6</sup> Madgin et al., 2018

<sup>7</sup> SQW, 2020.

<sup>8</sup> Blamire et al., 2023.

their places according to their own image. These outcomes each align with 'Levelling Up' policy ambitions to cultivate 'pride in place'. For reasons of space, we now pay closer attention to two of those projects, both based in North West England. We will demonstrate how these projects responded to a lack of provision by establishing new social and cultural infrastructures led by young people.

### **Stand Out**

Stand Out is an LGBTQ+ based heritage project run by a team of young producers aged 13-25, that works with the youth-led arts organisation Blaze Arts. Inspired by the first public meeting held by the Campaign for Homosexual Equality in 1971 at Burnley Library, which recently commemorated its 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary, Stand Out was formed in 2022 to explore local history and queer heritage in Burnley, particularly by way of gathering oral histories from older members of the local LGBTQ+ community. The group's initial aims were to revisit and reclaim the struggles of LGBTQ+ people, to create new forms of expression and safe spaces for LGBTQ+ people in Burnley and, through so doing, to combat discrimination within the town. Since then, Stand Out has published a zine investigating local and general queer-related history, and has organised pop-up exhibitions across the town as well as Burnley's first ever pride parade<sup>9</sup>.

We found that a key driver which encouraged young people to engage with place-based heritage activities was having the opportunity to learn more about the place they live and/or events relating to it, as well as having the chance to challenge, re-interpret and re-present the ways in which that place is understood. For instance, there is a desire among some of the young people involved to disrupt popular depictions of Burnley. Within recent public discourse, a perception has emerged, verging on a cliché, that strong support for Brexit within so-called 'left behind' towns such as Burnley reflects the views of an older, white, working-class local population that is reactionary, nostalgic, and resentful of the far-reaching cultural shifts that have come to define contemporary Britain<sup>10</sup>. In response, Stand Out makes visible and affirms the hidden histories which reflect social diversity within Burnley and, through so doing, stakes a claim for all minority people living in the town, and inspires queer culture to be celebrated within the town. The project has created a safe, inclusive social group for young people who identify as LGBTQ+ and allowed for new social connections to form across generational identities.

Stand Out has not only begun to reconfigure the landscapes of sexuality politics within the town, in turn making it arguably a more open, tolerant, vibrant, and diverse place in which to live, but the group is actively seeking to build partnership networks through which to obtain further funding towards establishing a permanent premises for LGBTQ+ people. Consequently, the young people can be seen as developing social capital and capacity within Burnley, and contributing positively to civic life. Participants gained new skills in leadership and communication through liaising with local charities, the community and voluntary sector, trade unions, Burnley Borough Council and Burnley Football Club. Some individuals also received training in aspects of event planning, management, and marketing. Through these activities, those involved became better equipped to stake their own claims to place, and to re-shape the town according to their own needs and desires.

<sup>9</sup> Slater, 2023.

<sup>10</sup> See Tyler et al., 2022 for a critique of this viewpoint.

### ***Connecting with Yemeni Elders' Heritage***

Connecting with Yemeni Elders' Heritage was an intergenerational project co-created by National Museums Liverpool working with a range of community partners: Liverpool Arabic Centre, the Al-Ghazali Centre, Al-Taiseer Mosque, Liverpool Arab Arts Festival, and the Kuumba Imani Millennium Centre. The project's aims included: enhancing community identity and pride among Yemeni communities; cultivating intergenerational community dialogue; enabling skills development for young people; and bringing museums closer to local communities and strengthening partnership-working with community organisations<sup>11</sup>. The project was inspired by a 14-year-old local boy of Yemeni background whose grandmother lived with dementia. Having discovered that the museum's app designed for people living with dementia failed to portray pictures and stories of specific relevance to the city's Yemeni community, an initiative to curate culturally-specific items was born. The project enabled young people of Yemeni heritage to support their parents and grandparents to re-connect with their own cultural heritage by capturing and preserving community stories and cultural traditions through dialogue with older community members. The material collected formed the content of a *Memories of Yemen* app launched in 2022. Over 40 young people participated in these activities. In September 2021 the project's Yemeni Culture Day, celebrated with traditional dance, dress, and food, attracted a multiethnic and multicultural audience of over 300 local residents.

Connecting with Yemeni Elders' Heritage has invited young Muslim boys and girls to share their lived experiences and stories of migration, to explore their own diverse identities, and to consider the contribution of Yemeni cultural heritage in shaping modern-day Liverpool. In so doing, the project enabled the young people to: "connect with Yemen"; to "share [their] Yemeni culture with others"; to "connect with new people"; to "learn things from one another"; and to "feel closer to the [Yemeni] community". The activities have helped to spur new interactions across generation, to welcome new arrivals into the city, and to forge new conceptions of identity and belonging for young Yemenis who already call Liverpool home. These new connections then have a role to play in combating social exclusion and building cohesive communities.

The young participants we spoke to also reflected upon the personal and educational development outcomes of the activities, such as using these experiences to gain entry to college, university, or the labour market, and the positive impacts upon their health and wellbeing. Finally, the project is thought by partners to have catalysed a sea-change in how communities and place-based organisations work together, as one project partner reflected: "for too long [our] under-resourced communities have been used to support the ambitions and work of those bigger and richer. We made it clear that this could not happen here again". Instead, the legacies are those of new voices being heard within the museum, and new forms of ownership of the city's existing social and cultural infrastructures are taking hold. Meanwhile, those from traditionally marginalised groups (young people, minority ethnic) were empowered to enrich this place and to positively contribute to civic life.

### **Towards New Social and Cultural Infrastructures**

Taken together, these activities produced fundamentally new spaces of engagement and interaction for communities of people across diverse ethnic, religious, gender, sexual, and generational identities. In so doing, they emphasise the places and spaces within which new social and cultural infrastructures are emerging with the potential to transform society. Let us consider further how these new infrastructures emerged, how they engaged with pre-existing forms of social and cultural infrastructure, and some of the challenges in building and maintaining these vehicles of change.

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<sup>11</sup> Wilson, 2023.

First, the projects both responded to a lack of pre-existing social and cultural infrastructures, a gap within provision, or a specific need for that social group within a locality. They then depended upon already existing informal networks or partnerships, skilled adult facilitators (often in the form of youth workers or community leaders) holding the requisite local knowledge and social capital to connect with young people and to support the work, combined with the inspiration and creativity of the young people themselves. While the projects appeared spontaneous, and did arise somewhat organically, they exploited different national-level heritage and non-heritage governmental and charitable funding mechanisms and drew upon the legacies of previous funding interventions. Connecting with Yemeni Elders' Heritage was supported through the Esmée Fairbairn Collections Fund while *House of Memories*, the museum's dedicated dementia awareness programme, was originally funded through the UK Government's Department of Health and Social Care. Stand Out was supported by Blaze Arts, which emerged out of Curious Minds, a charity established in 2009 to tackle unequal access to creativity and culture for young people in the North West<sup>12</sup>, and was one of the 10 Arts Council England-funded Bridge organisations<sup>13</sup> set-up to build and develop the infrastructure for young people's engagement with culture. Stand Out has since received funding from the National Lottery Heritage Fund.

These new social and cultural infrastructures called upon pre-existing place-based organisations, and their services and assets to create new spaces of interaction and engagement in innovative and creative ways. In Liverpool, this meant engaging with a system that seemed unrepresentative and impenetrable, and hoping for sympathetic gatekeepers. The partnership between different heritage, religious, and cultural institutions in the city continues to unsettle these barriers, and has stimulated new modes of cultural engagement bringing the voices of young Muslim boys and girls into these spaces and empowering them to shape and co-produce services. By comparison, in Burnley, the arts 'incubator effect' has allowed for the growth of a new organisation that can be invested in and developed over the long-term building connectivity and infrastructure. Successive policy initiatives since 2010, such as the Coalition Government's Localism and Big Society agendas, have advocated the redistribution of power away from the public sector and towards social enterprises, community groups, the private sector, families, and individuals. Notwithstanding its many critics<sup>14</sup>, these activities do show how marginalised communities can form novel, creative, and more reciprocal relationships with the public sector involving the co-creation of community-based services anew – often in-between the cracks of existing services and structures – rather than simply assuming responsibility for statutory ones.

Place is integral to nurturing the development of social and cultural infrastructures. First, in terms of how communities respond to what they might lack or desire, such as safe spaces and means of expression for LGBTQ+ people living in Burnley. These residents-driven, new spaces of engagement take on the distinct character and needs of those communities and reflect a degree of authenticity that centrally-administered services cannot replicate. While both projects responded to an injustice, they also took advantage of particular place-based opportunities thus answering the question of 'why here?'; similar ideas in other places may not necessarily have flourished. Yet, place is not just the terrain upon which this action occurs but, as set out above, is interwoven through the activities which seek to redefine this place and to invoke new ideas about what it, in the words of geographer Doreen Massey<sup>15</sup>, 'stands for'. The demographic, socioeconomic, political, and geographical make-up of a place therefore plays a role in determining the precise expressions and inflections of the types of social and cultural infrastructures that may emerge. The activities also entailed the claiming and appropriation of semi-public and public spaces such as museums, libraries, and the street, through which new communities became part of this place.

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<sup>12</sup> Curious Minds, 2023.

<sup>13</sup> Arts Connect, based at the University of Wolverhampton, was also part of the Bridge network.

<sup>14</sup> See North, 2011 for commentary.

<sup>15</sup> Massey, 2007.

There is a tendency within the 'Levelling Up' discourse to suggest that once-strong pride in ('left behind') places has since been lost, but in contrast these projects caution against any portrayal of place that remembers local communities as always homogeneous and harmonious. Instead, heritage provided the tool by which individuals could explore their own biographies and identities, and connect with a wider community of people within place. Stand Out, for instance, recognised Burnley as a site of multiple diverse and contested histories, advocating for what Doreen Massey<sup>16</sup> calls a 'progressive sense of place' that challenges reactionary ideas about a place ever being devoid of conflict. Making these alternative histories visible is seen by some community members as being a crucial step towards building a more diverse, vibrant, and peaceful town. The work of heritage, then, in informing public policy, is to be open and alive with possibilities rather than being nostalgic and backwards-looking.

There are crucial challenges to consider. First, there are important questions as to how these groups are being received within place. If Stand Out's visions for a more inclusive town are not necessarily shared among all residents, members may experience a sense of belonging jarred in addition to further marginalisation, prejudice, and discrimination. We should not romanticise these activities: building and maintaining infrastructures of this kind is not a straightforward process but is a highly politically and emotionally-charged endeavour with a myriad of uncertain outcomes.

Second, while the projects engaged new voices, young people's extracurricular heritage activities still attract a predominantly white, middle-class audience<sup>17</sup>. This underscores the importance of working with community partners to ensure that these spaces represent a range of diverse voices and interest groups.

Third, there are tensions concerning whether social and cultural infrastructure should be accessible to all for a range of activities by different people (such as, for instance, a local library). Our view is that these two models are blueprints for engaging different social groups and place-based organisations in dialogue to determine what forms of infrastructure are required, how might they come about, and for whom these infrastructures should exist.

Fourth, regarding legacy: the participants may move on; there is high staff turnover within the heritage and voluntary sector; project funding may be exhausted; community organisations might cease to exist; and the original purpose of the work may have been served. This emphasises the crucial role of anchor institutions such as local authorities, universities, museums, theatres, and football clubs in creating the conditions whereby these activities might be sustained and flourish, including documenting and archiving as well as maintaining institutional memory within place. Stand Out has won funding and has ambitions for self-sufficiency, but it is worth considering how these models may be better embedded in public policy.

### **Opportunities for Public Policy**

These social and cultural infrastructures have a considerable role to play in strengthening the UK's social fabric and can help address long-standing geographic inequalities that have been accentuated by austerity, the pandemic, and the cost-of-living crisis. The activities have contributed to building stronger cohesive communities, to enriching civic life, and to promoting young people's social mobility which may contribute to reviving the fortunes of so-called 'left behind' places. How, then, can these activities be better supported through public policy?

We have proposed recommendations for practitioners, policymakers, and funders who are looking to advance heritage work with young people.

<sup>16</sup> Massey, 1994.

<sup>17</sup> Blamire et al., 2022.



First, individuals are most attracted by opportunities to explore their own heritage and that which they themselves consider to be important. Those individuals should be engaged in the coproduction of activities and empowered to shape their own visions for heritage.

Second, the most transformative work has focused not only upon outcomes for young people but also for families, neighbourhoods and wider communities, and has displayed intercultural and intergenerational components.

Third, there is not enough robust evidence regarding 'what works' in heritage engagement as a body of professional knowledge and practice – i.e. the how and why of approaches and practices that achieve different ends and purposes. We have consequently argued that it ought to be a prerequisite of funding that activities are evaluated in accordance with consistent and high-quality measuring and reporting, twinned with the establishment of a publicly accessible central archive which collates details of programmes' activities and outcomes<sup>18</sup>. This policy would improve decision-making and accountability, better grow the evidence base concerning what works and why, and support research into new areas.

Fourth, proposed activities should demonstrate credible ideas for partnership-working as well as the skills for partnership practice such as the ability to lead, to broker, to hold space and convene, to co-create, and to support other partners. This could entail working with local, regional, and national stakeholders across the education, housing, transport, and healthcare sectors.

While redistributive policy is no doubt needed to reverse geographic inequalities, these examples demonstrate highly cost-effective means to 'Level Up' the country through revitalisation of communities via targeted spending that nourishes and sustains place-appropriate social and cultural infrastructure. This is particularly pertinent within a political context in which, for many years, the major political parties in the UK have competed on the terrain of fiscal responsibility. It is unlikely that the next UK General Election will herald a 'big bang' of public spending regardless of who wins office, with both Labour and the Conservative Party seemingly eager to find cuter preventative solutions to tackling inequalities, social exclusion, and crime, and improving health and wellbeing. Our research demonstrates that the physical infrastructures already exist, that there is considerable energy and untapped potential among young people living within 'left behind' places, and with the requisite funding and support these activities can improve the social fabric of a place. This work could be nurtured through nuanced and targeted pump-priming money, rather than any big legislative or largescale policy programme, in order to support the flourishing of those 'spaces in-between'. This need not solely be about government money, but different funders better aligning their resources to support this social infrastructure over the longer-term. This could also take the form of capacity investment, enabling partners to build relationships, trust, and ideas, in order to develop this collaborative work.

We also propose widening fledgling place-based social prescribing models to incorporate innovative and creative heritage activity. Our work with regional healthcare partners in the West Midlands has illustrated the need to map existing forms of social infrastructure for the purposes of growing social prescribing<sup>19</sup>. Embedding these heritage models within social prescribing could help to create *new* spaces of interaction and engagement. During our fieldwork, one young person noted that their local museum offered no provision for celebrating (their) Romanian heritage. Within a social prescribing model, an anchor heritage organisation may take the lead in organising, for instance, a time-limited community heritage project that co-curates an exhibition exploring Central and Eastern European cultural heritage and its contribution to the UK. Residents could contribute personal stories and lend material objects to the exhibition, promoted through local events. The participants may be referred by local migrant and refugee charities, social care, health services, and schools, working with heritage

<sup>18</sup> Blamire et al., 2023.

<sup>19</sup> Hopley et al., 2023.

professionals to exchange skills, knowledge, and experience. Unlike within existing versions of social prescribing, the delivery organisation would receive per-participant payments in order to properly and meaningfully carry out the work. This policy would enable such activities to be better embedded within local health and social care systems. As with those heritage activities that met local need, place-based social prescribing models also typically favour a more organic pro-social approach to health and social care provision.

Finally, we call for a fresh research agenda to explore these themes, especially in relation to policymaking contexts, which our *Tackling Inequalities through Heritage and the Arts* body of work at the Institute for Community Research & Development has begun, working to understand the broader possibilities for heritage and the arts in responding to these policy challenges and contributing to the social and economic revival of places.

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