

AHRC Place-Based Research Programme



Embedding Community Voices in Local Heritage Strategies: Insights from *Roots and Futures*

“Inclusive practice means working in a way in which no one feels excluded. As we are starting from a position which is markedly exclusive, we have a long way to go.” [Historic England Inclusivity, Diversity and Equality Strategy 2020-23](#)

This brief makes recommendations from the *Roots and Futures* project to meaningfully embed diverse perspectives within heritage strategies, policies and practices.

Challenge and Context

Local authorities, national governments and heritage bodies are seeking better ways to empower and include the voices of under-served communities, often through celebrating cultural heritage. For example, the Sheffield Heritage Strategy aims “to champion a diverse heritage, reflecting a diverse Sheffield”,¹ and Historic England aims to enhance belonging, wellbeing and inclusion.² To do this meaningfully and sustainably requires new place-based methods and approaches. This paper proposes participatory methods that more effectively support diversifying community voices in local heritage strategy.

Towards an inclusive heritage framework

Our work found that communities desire greater visibility and recognition of their heritages. Addressing this in meaningful ways is a fundamental step towards building trust between different communities, and between residents and decision makers.

“History makes you feel connected and gives you a sense of pride...[but] would you know there are black and brown people living here? Part of history has been stolen”

Embedding Diverse Perspectives Requires:

1. Novel participatory approaches that are genuinely centred on people and rooted in place
2. Re-thinking heritage strategy and programming to meet a wider range of needs
3. Meaningfully platforming diverse voices, experiences, practices and traditions
4. Diversifying leadership within local heritage policymaking and heritage institutions
5. Broadening engagement beyond traditional heritage societies and ‘Friends Of’ groups

¹ Joined Up Heritage Sheffield. 2020. ‘A Heritage Strategy for Sheffield 2021-31’

² Historic England. 2022. Discovery Innovation and Science in the Historic Environment: Research. Issue 20. Heritage and Wellbeing Special. Historic England

Roots and Futures

[Roots and Futures](#) explored the perspectives of under-served communities in Sheffield, particularly Sheffield's Black, Asian and minority ethnic communities. It focused on place-based heritages, histories and stories and developed recommendations for embedding diverse perspectives in city-level heritage strategies. **Our outputs include a [Community Voices booklet](#), [practice-based toolkit](#), [project blog](#) and [short film](#).**

- ❖ **Where & When:** In seven communities across the city of Sheffield, January 2022 – 2023
- ❖ **Project partners:** Joined Up Heritage Sheffield, Sheffield City Council, University of Sheffield, Sheffield-based community partners including Zest, SOAR, Sheffield and District African Caribbean Community Association, Care for Young People's Future, ChilyPep, Manor and Castle Development Trust, and Heeley City Farm.
- ❖ **What:** Co-production using participatory action research at events including five workshops, four community meals, three outdoor chats over tea, two youth group meetings and 15 oral history recordings.
- ❖ **Who:** 553 users of community services provided by our community partners

Key Findings from Sheffield

- **For place-based practices to be meaningful they need to be bespoke.** With Sheffield and District African Caribbean Community Association we co-designed welcoming events in community spaces that enabled participants to reflect on their heritages while sharing a meal. These people-centred and place-based consultation methods resulted in lively conversation that produced a rich evidence base that cannot be developed solely through generic focus groups or online surveys.
- **Inclusive processes start from creating space for community-owned stories.** Members of the Park Library women's group wanted to share their stories with the rest of the city. We developed an oral histories project with them to document and own their stories. This has been co-converted into a Windrush anniversary exhibition with Sheffield Museums.
- **Speaking directly to decision makers is key.** Our Community Voices booklet has enabled community opinions to directly reach decision makers. Our practice-based toolkit, developed with community groups, helped organisations to deliver more inclusive heritage-focused activities. We tailored activities and outputs for all community partners in response to their specific long-term needs and brokered connections between communities and policy makers.
- **Long-term equitable partnerships can be embedded.** Participants saw the support provided by the city's institutions and leaders as vital to give their heritages, histories and stories "more weight" and make them "more accepted". A "two-way conversation" was needed.

We trialled novel participatory approaches to heritage strategy and programming that platformed diverse voices, experiences, practices and traditions. Outcomes included:

- Bespoke consultation questions.
- Inclusive activities that supported heritage priorities and needs of under-served communities.
- Richer evidence bases for local and national heritage decision-makers.
- Identified actions that can be supported by place-based communities.

Recommendations for policy and strategy makers:

- ❖ **Place-based and people-centred approaches: Make spaces for consultation that are welcoming and equitable by focusing on participants' autonomy, comfort and dignity. Familiar spaces, culturally appropriate food and appropriate communal activities bring people together.**
- ❖ **Develop bespoke heritage programmes and heritage focussed networks that facilitate communities working together, including resourcing community-led and participatory approaches.**
- ❖ **Ensure strategies are long-term, empowering and embedded by upskilling participants, creating new networks and platforming people with lived and felt experience in leadership roles.**
- ❖ **Bring the specific needs of under-served communities to the table by reaching out to hidden leaders and smaller organisations as well as established anchor organisations and larger community groups.**

What Next?

- We are working with local partners, including Sheffield City Council to ensure the *Roots and Futures* evidence base is further mobilised to support future heritage and cultural strategy.
- The *Roots and Futures* toolkit is being trialled by local partners The Green Estate.
- We are scaling up our engagements in schools and with young people's organisations including the Sheffield Youth Cabinet, local sports clubs, schools and youth groups.

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We look forward to hearing from you to discuss any aspect of this brief.

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