

Intangible heritage and design in historic contexts



AHRC Innovation Scholars Secondment (2023-2025)
Full Report

Dr Johnathan Djabarouti

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Historic England
3rd Floor Canada House
3 Chepstow Street
Manchester
M1 5FW

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Summary

This research examines how intangible cultural heritage (ICH) informs historic environment policy and practice within Historic England's remit. Undertaken through an Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) Innovation Scholars secondment (2023-25), it explores how lived experience, community memory, and cultural practices shape the significance of historic places and how these intangible dimensions can be recognised within design, conservation, and broader decision-making.

Evidence was gathered through internal focus groups with Historic England staff across a range of departments and roles, three detailed case studies – Bootham Crescent, York; Heritage Building Skills Programme; and Kirkham High Street Heritage Action Zone – and a wider analysis of policy, research, and documentary sources.

Findings identified five recurring 'Cultural Mechanisms' – materials, spaces, practices, narratives, and experiences – which describe the principal ways in which intangible cultural heritage interacts with the physical environment, making the relationship between cultural life and historic fabric more legible for policy and practice. From these, the study developed two sets of interconnected guidance: eight 'Designer Principles' for architects and conservation practitioners; and eight 'Decision-Maker Priorities' for funders, policymakers, and asset owners. Together they provide a shared framework and practical tools for integrating ICH within built heritage processes, supporting Historic England's ambition to sustain the historic environment as a living cultural process grounded in the relationship between people, practice, and place.

Author

Dr Johnathan Djabarouti ARB IHBC FHEA FIPM is an architect, accredited conservation professional, and Senior Lecturer in Architecture at the Manchester School of Architecture, Manchester Metropolitan University, UK, where he co-leads the Built Heritage research group within the Faculty of Arts & Humanities.

His research spans heritage policy, architectural design, conservation philosophy, and critical heritage methodologies, with a particular focus on the intersections between tangible and intangible heritage in Western-European contexts, and their influence on the conservation and adaptation of historic places.

He is the author of *Critical Built Heritage Practice and Conservation: Evolving Perspectives* (Routledge, 2024) and *Intangible Heritage Design: A Practical Guide* (RIBA Publishing, forthcoming). He has delivered CPD on the relationship between tangible and intangible heritage for the Institute of Historic Building Conservation (IHBC), the Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA), the National Lottery Heritage Fund (NLHF), and the Royal Town Planning Institute (RTPI).

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Front cover image: “‘Walking and Talking’ – People browsing market stalls and walking along Gentleman’s Walk.” © Lydia Taylor. Source: Historic England Archive.

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Contact details

Dr Johnathan Djabarouti ARB IHBC FHEA FIPM

jadjabarouti@gmail.com

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Abbreviations

2003 Convention	UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage
AHRC	Arts and Humanities Research Council
BS	British Standards
DCMS	Department for Culture, Media & Sport
HBSP	Heritage Building Skills Programme
HE	Historic England
HEAC	Historic England Advisory Committee
HSHAZ	High Street Heritage Action Zone
ICCROM	International Centre for the Study of the Preservation and Restoration of Cultural Property
ICH	Intangible cultural heritage
NASP	The National Academy for Social Prescribing
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
NHLE	National Heritage List for England
NPPF	National Planning Policy Framework
UK	United Kingdom
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization

Cultural mechanisms

- I** **Materials** that carry cultural memory
- II** **Spaces** that support cultural use
- III** **Practices** that animate conservation
- IV** **Narratives** that shape significance
- V** **Experiences** that connect people and place

Designer principles

- 1** Design with memory in mind
- 2** Reveal traces of use
- 3** Curate meaningful routes
- 4** Celebrate repair and imperfection
- 5** Support cultural use
- 6** Use materials that matter
- 7** Make room for stories
- 8** Work at the human scale

Decision-maker priorities

- 1** Recognise emotional and sensory value
- 2** Support skilled communities
- 3** Document cultural practice
- 4** Involve people early
- 5** Treat local narrative as evidence
- 6** Align conservation with cultural continuity
- 7** Enable use as well as preservation
- 8** Work at the interfaces

Introduction

In March 2024 the United Kingdom ratified UNESCO's *Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage* (2003 Convention) (UNESCO, 2003). This was a landmark step in national heritage policy, aligning the UK with international approaches that recognise cultural practices, traditions, skills, stories, and other non-physical expressions as heritage in their own right. The ratification was followed in April 2025 by the Department for Culture, Media and Sport's (DCMS) Living Heritage consultation response (Department for Culture Media & Sport, 2025), which established the policy architecture for implementation across the UK. Its guiding principles emphasise community-based approaches, inclusive methodologies, respect for community expertise, and open frameworks that accommodate multiple values. Together these developments signal a shift away from reliance on expert-led, fabric-centred models of heritage and towards approaches that give greater weight to immaterial aspects of culture – including social practices, stories, locally held knowledge and cultural values.

ICH and Historic England's remit

For Historic England (HE), as the government's statutory adviser on the English historic environment, the recent national shift towards ICH prompts important reflection. The organisation's remit, defined by the National Heritage Act (HM Government, 1983), centres on safeguarding ancient monuments and historic buildings, supporting the preservation of conservation areas, maintaining the National Heritage List for England (NHLE), and advancing public understanding and enjoyment of heritage. These responsibilities focus on the protection, management, and interpretation of the material historic environment. Ratification of the 2003 Convention introduces no new legal duties for HE, and the organisation does not hold a mandate to safeguard ICH as a standalone domain.

Nevertheless, intangible dimensions of culture have long been part of how HE understands significance in practice, with formal recognition of "communal value" through the Conservation Principles being one obvious route in to being able to give weight to memory, identity, symbolism, and social practice alongside evidential, historical, and aesthetic values (Historic England, 2008). Subsequent work in wellbeing, inclusion, and place-based regeneration, along with creative programmes, community engagement initiatives, and skills-focused projects, has continued to demonstrate that cultural practices and lived experience shape how places are used, cared for, and valued (see Historic England, 2016, 2019b, 2020b, 2020a, 2020c, 2021a, 2022a, 2023a, 2023b, 2024g). More recent activities concerning high street culture (Historic England, 2025b) and expanding the scope of historic interest (Historic England, 2024g) further illustrate how stories, traditions, and community use can inform assessments of significance and support more inclusive, grounded decision-making.

Taken together, these examples show that whilst HE is not responsible for safeguarding ICH in its own right, ICH frequently enhances the understanding, interpretation, and stewardship of tangible heritage assets. Cultural practices are often place-based and occur in and around historic places, leave physical traces on them, and influence how communities connect with their local environment. It is this interface – where cultural life helps reveal the meaning of historic fabric – that sits squarely within HE’s remit.

Recognising the importance of this relationship, HE commissioned WSP in 2020 to provide advice on its future engagement with ICH (WSP, 2020). The study recommended a staged approach: consolidating internal knowledge, then broadening consultation, and finally considering the development of expertise. This report directly advances the first of these stages by mapping organisational perspectives and synthesising learning across projects.

ICH and HE: remit at a glance

- *Historic England’s statutory duties relate only to the material historic environment.*
- *Ratification of the 2003 Convention does not add any new legal responsibilities.*
 - *HE is not responsible for safeguarding ICH as a separate domain.*
- *ICH is relevant where it illuminates the significance, use, or understanding of physical places – for example, where cultural practices shape historic fabric, influence community attachment, or support interpretation.*
- *Recognising intangible dimensions can deepen HE’s advisory role without expanding its remit.*

AHRC Secondment project

The AHRC-funded Innovation Scholars secondment, undertaken between 2023 and 2025 in partnership with the Manchester School of Architecture (Manchester Metropolitan University, UK), was designed to support this next phase of organisational reflection. Conducted on a part-time basis, the project was co-designed to investigate the relationship between intangible and tangible heritage and to explore how HE might engage more directly with ICH within the scope of its existing functions. The overall aim was to strengthen the organisation’s advisory role in preserving historic character by recognising the links between ICH and historic places, thereby encouraging more diverse and inclusive understandings of the historic environment.

Based in HE’s Policy Development Team, and connected to agendas on national listing, wellbeing, and participation, the secondment examined how ICH contributes to place-

shaping and how it might broaden existing approaches to heritage practice. The knowledge generated was intended to enhance HE's capacity to advise partners, inform government approaches to design and place-making, and offer insights for contributing towards forthcoming reforms.

The secondment had three primary objectives:

1. To capture how HE staff understand and encounter ICH in their work.
2. To examine through case studies how ICH manifests in current projects, with particular attention paid to the interface between tangible and intangible.
3. To synthesise findings into a framework that clarifies the mechanisms connecting intangible and tangible heritage.

Research activities

Research combined organisational engagement, qualitative enquiry, and case analysis.

- Preliminary conversations with HE staff set organisational ICH context in tandem with the pragmatics of its function.
- Focus groups with HE staff explored how ICH is conceptualised, the opportunities and barriers it presents, and its relevance to statutory responsibilities.
- Case studies revealed through focus groups examined three contrasting contexts:
 - Bootham Crescent, York – community memory and commemoration in redevelopment.
 - Heritage Building Skills Programme – traditional skills as living heritage.
 - Kirkham High Street Heritage Action Zone – ICH, wellbeing, and regeneration.
- A Working Party offered a broad reach of expertise and input across the organisation for the duration of the research project.
- A smaller more engaged Steering Group provided a regular forum for discussing findings and refining the outputs within the context of constantly shifting ICH and organisational landscapes.

Purpose and structure of this report

This report consolidates secondment findings into a single accessible resource. It demonstrates how HE is already engaging with ICH, presents empirical evidence of how these connections operate in practice, and highlights the challenges, barriers, and

complexities that accompany this engagement, alongside the implications for future policy and practice in light of the UK's new heritage commitments.

Following this introduction (Section 1), the report is organised into the following sections:

- Research design – sets out overarching aims, objectives, and research questions shaping the project, and explaining how they informed choice of methods.
- Methodology – details methodological approach, including staff engagement activities, focus groups, and case study work.
- Literature and context – situates the project within wider scholarship and policy, identifying how debates around ICH intersect with HE's remit.
- Focus group findings – presents perspectives from staff across the organisation, illustrating how ICH is currently understood, where opportunities lie, and what challenges are encountered.
- Case studies – explores three broad ranging examples to show how ICH manifests in practice and what it reveals about the relationship between the tangible and intangible qualities of heritage.
- Recommendations and Conclusion – synthesises findings across the project, identifying a series of 'Cultural Mechanisms' and related 'Designer Principles' and 'Decision-maker Priorities' to support the organisation's and sector's future engagement with ICH.

Whilst the findings do not directly determine HE's ICH policy, they provide preliminary recommendations that are anticipated to undergo secondary review by the organisation outside the secondment period to assess costs and impacts.

Research design

The overall aim of the research was to explore how ICH can be more explicitly recognised, understood, and integrated within HE's remit. To address this, the project was structured to balance organisational breadth with case-specific depth, combining staff engagement across the organisation with detailed case study investigations. This design ensured that both strategic perspectives and grounded practices were brought into conversation. Three core objectives framed the enquiry:

1. To capture current understandings of ICH across HE and explore how staff perceive its relevance to statutory responsibilities.
2. To test and refine conceptual framings of ICH through collaborative activities, including interviews and focus groups.
3. To investigate how ICH is manifested, negotiated, and sustained in practice through selected case studies.

From these objectives, a set of overarching research questions were developed:

- How do HE staff conceptualise ICH, and how consistent are these perspectives?
- How does ICH contribute to significance, conservation, and use of historic places?
- How might ICH be more effectively embedded into HE's statutory and advisory work?
- What barriers and opportunities arise for policy, resources, and practice?

Research design was operationalised through British Design Council's Double Diamond model which was endorsed by the AHRC and guided the project through four sequential phases: Discover, Define, Develop, and Deliver (Figure 1). methodological choices described in the following chapter were aligned to these phases, ensuring that the research remained both conceptually grounded and operationally relevant for HE.

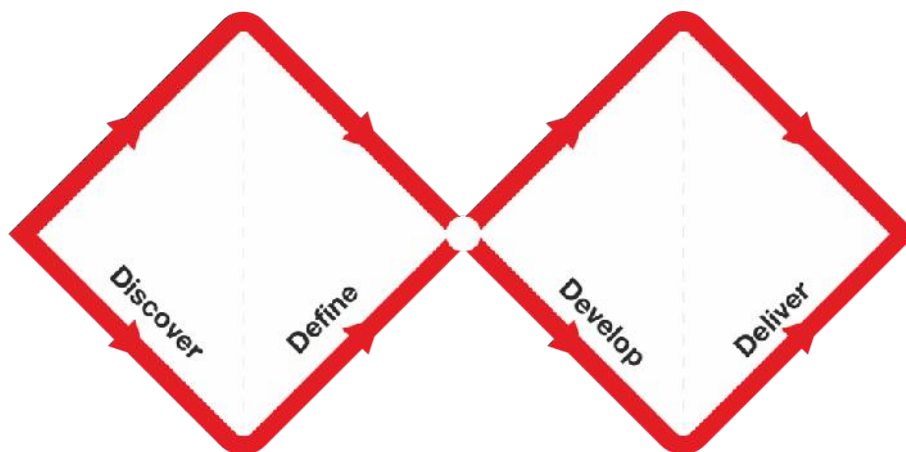


Figure 1 – The Double Diamond by the Design Council
Design Council, CC BY 4.0

Methodology

Methods were designed to engage staff, capture organisational perspectives, and examine ICH in real project contexts. In doing so, the activities generated research data but also created moments for reflection, discussion, and shared learning, helping to seed a gradual cultural shift within HE by giving colleagues dedicated space to think about ICH and its relevance to their work. The methodological approach combined three main strands:

1. Internal engagement with staff across different functions.
2. Thematic enquiry through focus groups.
3. Case studies examining the interface of tangible and intangible heritage in practice.

Each method generated distinct insights whilst feeding into the overarching objectives of the secondment.

Discover

The first objective was to establish and reflect on how the organisation currently conceptualises immaterial manifestations of culture within their work. To establish this initial organisational context, nineteen one-to-one conversations were held with staff from across the organisation between January and May 2024, representing seventeen areas of expertise and covering a wide range of roles and responsibilities (Table 1).

Table 1 – Scope of expertise from preliminary conversations

Count	Remit
1	Environmental and rural
2	Places of Worship
3	Marine and Coastal
4	Historic Buildings and Areas
5	Sector Resilience and Skills
6	Public Engagement, Participation and Learning
7	Policy
8	Information
9	Ancient Monuments
10	Places
11	Inclusivity
12	International
13	Analytics
14	Listing
15	Research
16	Landscape
17	Wellbeing

Recognising that ICH engagement can support HE’s statutory responsibilities by deepening the understanding of tangible heritage, it was appropriate to hypothesise that an **organisationally specific definition of ICH** would be beneficial but may differ from other official or academic understandings of ICH. This project focused primarily on findings from staff engagement activities and organisational insights, and does not attempt to provide an academic literature review of the topic, which is covered in significant detail elsewhere (Djabarouti, 2020, 2021, 2024a, 2024c, 2024b). Preliminary insights were mapped through network analysis, which revealed five organisational strands of ICH understanding that shaped the subsequent direction of the project (Figure 3):

1. A broader holistic view of heritage
2. Local heritage narratives
3. Place attachment
4. Participation and co-creation
5. Community-led contribution

This scoping activity occurred alongside the DCMS Open Consultation on Living Heritage (Department for Culture Media and Sport, 2023), which was announced at the start of the secondment period. Insights from the consultation reinforced the importance of inclusive and community-based approaches and were integrated into the framing of subsequent stages.

Define

The second phase narrowed the focus of the project to specific areas of study. Two complementary methods were employed: focus groups and case study analysis. Together, the focus groups and case studies formed the empirical core of the secondment, providing both organisation-wide insights and place-based evidence (Figure 2).

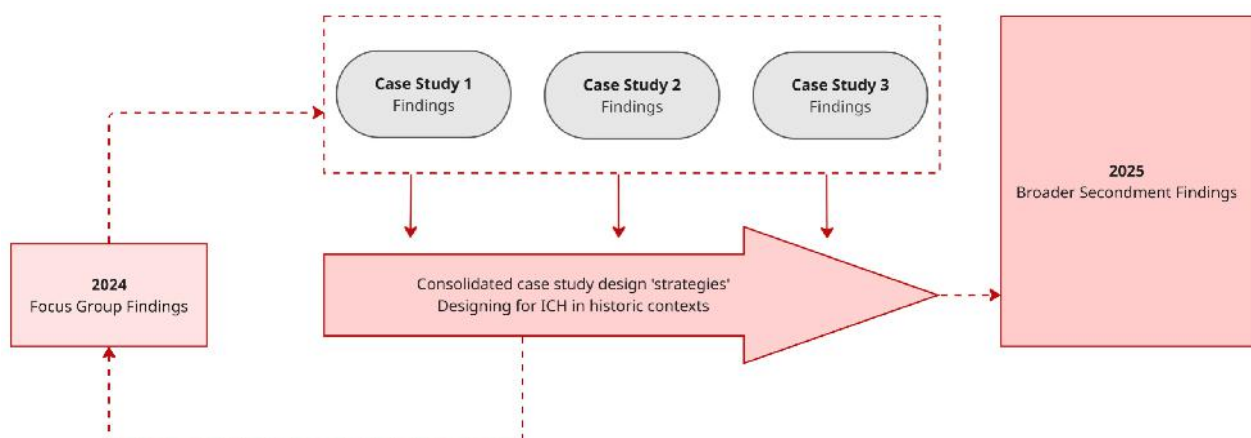


Figure 2 – Empirical flow of secondment project

Author original image © All Rights Reserved

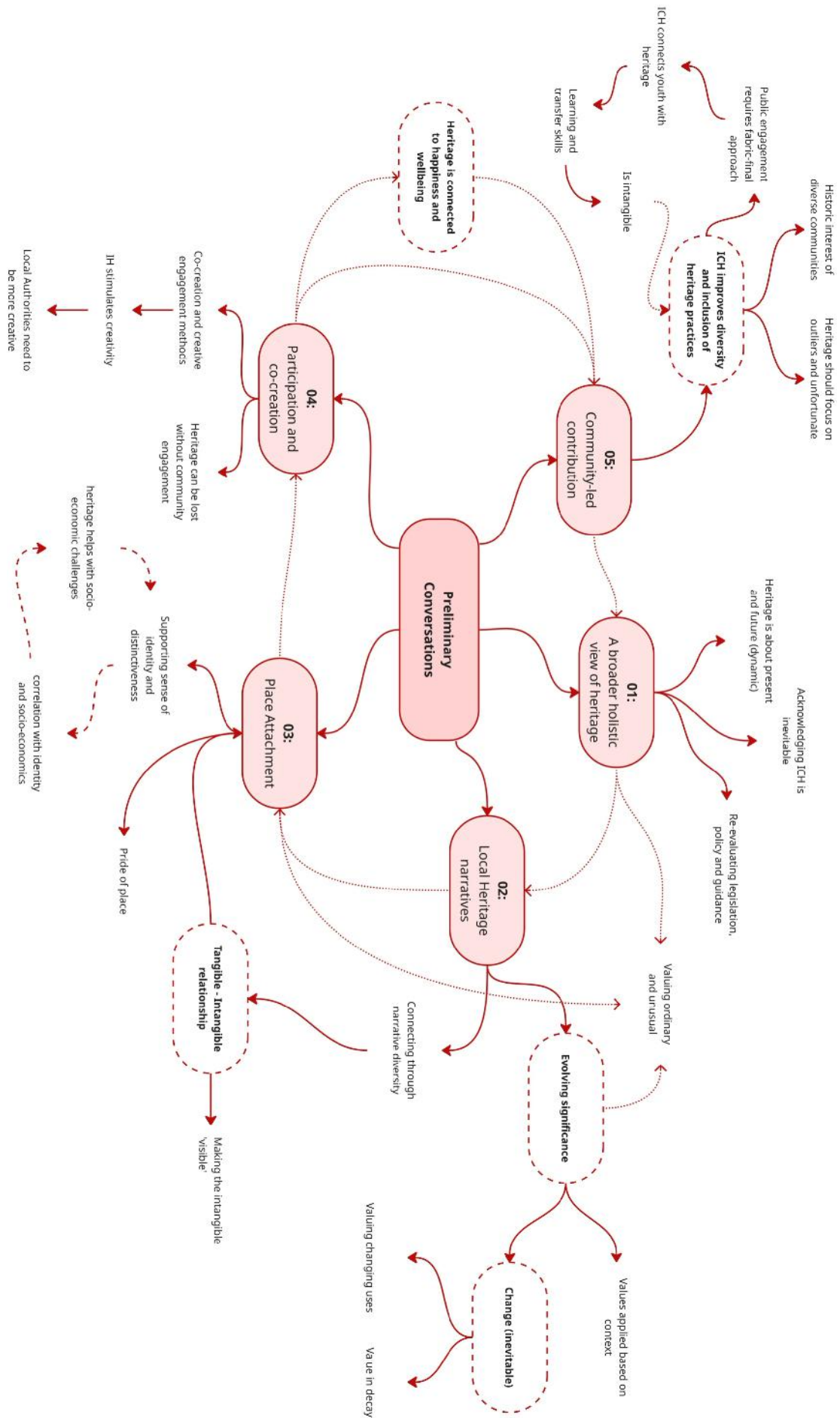


Figure 3 – Network of themes from preliminary conversations

Focus groups

Two three-hour online focus groups were convened in June 2024, framed as ‘ICH Working Party Mornings’. Together they involved twenty-four staff with expertise in planning, listing, research, policy, engagement, conservation and wellbeing. Both senior and operational roles were represented, spanning national and regional perspectives (Table 2). Each session followed a set itinerary covering three topics with comfort breaks (Table 3).

Topics were introduced with a provocation and guiding questions to stimulate healthy discussion and debate, with conversations alternating between plenary and breakout groups. The overarching topics, provocations, and guiding questions were informed by the preliminary one-to-one conversations, ensuring continuity from the Discover phase. Focus groups were recorded through detailed notes, online collaboration tools, transcripts, and later analysed thematically.

Table 2 – Focus group participants departments and expertise

Count	Department	Expertise	Session 1 Group	Session 2 Group
1	Policy and Evidence	Communities & Local Government	✓	✓
2		Devolution	✓	✓
3		Listing	✓	
4		Research Development 1	✓	✓
5		Research Development 2	✓	✓
6		Social & Economic Research	✓	✓
7		Wellbeing 1		✓
8		Wellbeing 2	✓	
9		Rural	✓	
10		Places of Worship	✓	✓
11		Marine & Coastal	✓	✓
12		Sector Resilience & Skills	✓	✓
13		Heritage Skills		✓
14		Landscape	✓	✓
15		Environmental	✓	
16	Regions	Information	✓	✓
17		Ancient Monuments		✓
18		Historic Buildings & Areas	✓	✓
19		Listing		✓
20	Public Engagement	Participation and Learning 1	✓	
21		Participation and Learning 2	✓	
22		Participation		✓
23		Inclusion	✓	✓
24	C.E. Office	International	✓	✓
Total participants per session			19	18

Table 3 – Focus groups format

Time	Item
10:00-10:25	Project & session intro / HE context / recap
10:25-11:00	Topic / activity 1
11:00-11:45	Topic / activity 2
11:45-12:00	Comfort break
12:00-12:45	Topic / activity 3
12:45-13:00	Summary / concluding remarks

Session 1 – Heritage classifications and their connections

The first focus group session considered how ICH might be framed and understood within HE's remit. Discussions explored different interpretations of ICH, its relationship with tangible heritage, and how attachments to place emerge through the interplay of material and immaterial elements. Participants reflected on how such framings could influence the organisation's scope of engagement and support its statutory responsibilities.

Session 2 – Heritage and place-based communities

The second focus group session shifted the emphasis to community perspectives and contributions. Debate examined tensions between local narratives and notions of national importance, the role of communities in sustaining heritage, and whether participatory and co-creative practices can be seen as forms of ICH in themselves. These conversations highlighted both opportunities and challenges for HE in recognising the *constant recreation* of heritage by communities whilst working within statutory frameworks.

Case studies

From the preliminary conversations and focus groups, three candidate case studies were identified to examine the relationship between tangible and intangible heritage in practice:

1. Bootham Crescent, York

Explored how memory, commemoration, and cultural practices shape the redevelopment of a historic football ground.

2. Heritage Building Skills Programme

Examined the safeguarding of traditional craft knowledge as a form of intangible heritage directly tied to historic environment conservation.

3. Kirkham High Street Heritage Action Zone

Considered how intangible heritage contributes to wellbeing and social prescribing, linking cultural practices with health and regeneration.

Develop

Findings from the focus groups and case studies were analysed and synthesised into thematic categories. This process drew on both inductive coding of qualitative data and reflection on wider policy and organisational frameworks. Emerging insights were presented, discussed and tested with a project Steering Group, ensuring that the findings were grounded in HE's operational realities and informed by cross-departmental perspectives. This stage also involved refining the emerging thematic framework that describes how intangible and tangible heritage intersect.

Deliver

The final phase consolidated the evidence into outputs tailored to different audiences. The principal outcome is this formal HE Research Report, which presents methods, findings, and implications in a single accessible resource. Additional outputs include academic publications authored by the secondee and various presentation materials for dissemination.

Alongside these deliverables, the research process itself generated value by raising awareness of ICH within HE, encouraging colleagues to debate its relevance by beginning to normalise discussion of intangible dimensions of heritage in organisational contexts.

Ethical considerations

All interviews, focus groups, and case study activities were conducted with informed consent from participants. No personal identifiers are included in the report. Participation was voluntary, and care was taken to ensure that staff could speak freely without attribution.

Ethical approval was sourced via the seconding institution, Manchester Metropolitan University (Ethical Approval Reference 61754), and subsequently approved via the host organisation, HE, on 29/04/2024 (REA8).

The findings reflect the views expressed during the phase of research activity and the author's analysis and are not the official position of HE.

Towards an intangible outlook

Shifts in heritage thinking

Over recent decades, heritage scholarship has moved away from a narrow concern with material remains towards recognising heritage as a cultural and social process. The emergence of Critical Heritage Theory reframed heritage as something produced and negotiated in the present, stressing how values, identities, and power relations shape what is conserved and remembered (Harrison, 2013; L. Smith, 2006). This perspective unsettled the notion that heritage is purely objective, self-evident or inherently located in physical fabric, instead emphasising its dependence on practices, memories, and community knowledge.

As these critiques have gained ground, heritage has come to be understood as both tangible and intangible, with the latter encompassing skills, stories, rituals, and cultural expressions that animate and sustain the historic environment. This broadened conception has stimulated more participatory and community-led approaches, acknowledging that heritage is lived and constantly recreated across time.

More recently, scholarship has argued for a post-critical stance, which builds on earlier critiques but also seeks constructive ways to integrate intangible heritage within more traditional conservation frameworks. This shift recognises that progress on this theme within Western contexts has been made, and calls for strategies that are pragmatic, future-facing, and embedded in the realities of heritage practice.

UK and England-specific context

The UK's initial decision not to ratify the 2003 Convention left it as an outlier in the international context for two decades. During this period, intangible aspects of heritage were often addressed indirectly – through cultural policy, lottery and arts funding, and more fringe conservation activity – rather than operating within a dedicated safeguarding mechanism. In June 2020, Lord Patten questioned DCMS on whether the UK Government intended to sign the 2003 Convention, prompting a reply from Baroness Barran that “we have not seen any compelling business case for ratifying the UNESCO Convention, nor is it clear that the benefits of doing so would outweigh the costs” (UK Parliament, 2020). This hesitation delayed formal commitment, though momentum continued to build through cultural and heritage sector advocacy.

Despite this, intangible dimensions have not been absent in heritage documentation. Documents such as *Power of Place* (English Heritage, 2000) emphasised social value and local memory, whilst the National Lottery Heritage Fund explicitly recognised intangible heritage as part of the heritage funding landscape (National Lottery Heritage Fund, 2019). ICOMOS-UK also placed significant emphasis on exploring ICH in the UK, piloting

community-led projects that linked tangible artefacts with intangible practices (Arokiasamy, 2018). Various revisions to the National Planning Policy Framework (Department for Levelling Up Housing & Communities, 2023) also signalled a gradual shift away from prescriptive, fabric-led approaches towards more socially grounded definitions of significance. This context changed fundamentally in March 2024 when the UK ratified the 2003 Convention. Just prior to this, DCMS published an open consultation (December 2023) to support plans for ratification, which centred on defining and identifying ICH in a UK context (Department for Culture Media and Sport, 2023). They followed with their Living Heritage consultation response (Department for Culture Media & Sport, 2025), which set out four guiding principles: that safeguarding should be community-based, inclusive, respectful, and open. These principles challenge traditional expert-led approaches by prioritising lived cultural realities. They also carry direct implications for practice in England, where conservation has historically prioritised activities that uphold a sense of material authenticity.

Research has shown that built heritage practitioners in the UK perceive several barriers to working more explicitly with intangible heritage. These include uncertainties around definition, concerns about role complexity, and difficulties in reconciling intangible practices with statutory processes (Djabarouti, 2021), as well as a broader confusion between the discernment and embodiment of heritage (Bedford, 2024). Yet there is also evidence that intangible understandings of heritage are implicit in everyday practice, particularly through attention to stories, memory, and emotions.

Historic England context

HE is positioned at the intersection of these international and national shifts and has already acknowledged that heritage significance can extend beyond matters relating to the physical attributes of designated assets. The introduction of “communal value” brought an intangible dimension to heritage significance (Historic England, 2008). Subsequent work continues to extend and refine the boundaries of the organisation’s scope, such as their Everyday Heritage Grants (Historic England, 2023a) or their Wellbeing and the Historic Environment report (Reilly et al., 2018) which explicitly identifies ICH as both a research gap and a vital link to health outcomes. This orientation has been reinforced in subsequent activities. For example:

- The development of strategies for wellbeing, health, heritage and the historic environment (Historic England, 2019a, 2022a).
- The focus on skills and safeguarding traditional craft knowledge (Historic England, 2024a).
- The funding of standalone projects such as Bootham Crescent, York, which explored how the memories, stories and cultural traditions of places can inform new development (Emerick, 2018; Historic England, 2019a).

- Heritage Action Zones and high street regeneration which emphasised how local memory and cultural practices underpin successful place-making (Historic England, 2024c).
- Research on heritage capital and wellbeing that positioned intangible and tangible heritage as interconnected contributors to life satisfaction (Historic England, 2024b).
- Expansions to existing listing guidance such as ‘Understanding Special Historic Interest in Listing’ (Historic England, 2024g).

These examples show how HE has engaged with concepts that would be classified as ICH, albeit often implicitly, without the ‘ICH’ label, and without a consolidated organisational framework that is informed by a broader national ICH strategy. Recognition of this need emerged from the Tailored Review of Historic England (November 2020) which noted the following:

“The classification of what constitutes ‘heritage’ constantly changes. HE must ensure that it is open to new and emerging understandings of what constitutes heritage, including that which is intangible.”
(Department for Digital Culture Media and Sport, 2020)

Two key reports subsequently emerged in 2020: 1) a project on intangible cultural heritage which raised concerns about integrating ICH into designation and management (Historic England, 2020e); and 2) the aforementioned WSP report, which highlighted widespread misconceptions of ICH as simply oral or social history, instead arguing that it represents living practices central to community identity (WSP, 2020). WSP found that HE staff were already engaging with intangible aspects across diverse areas of practice, but in a fragmented way. To address this, the report recommended a staged approach: consolidating internal knowledge in the short term, extending consultation with external stakeholders in the medium term, and developing additional expertise in the longer term. Together, these initiatives positioned ICH as potentially relevant to HE’s remit but in need of further investigation and careful consolidation.

In 2024, HE’s Executive Team also received an internal paper establishing parameters for its response to DCMS’s ratification of the Convention. The paper recommended limiting engagement to cases where ICH had a direct impact on tangible heritage, whilst also initiating an internal audit of existing expertise.

This secondment directly addresses the first of WSP’s recommendations by consolidating knowledge internally through staff engagement, case study analysis, and the development of a thematic framework. In doing so, it provides a foundation for the organisation to confidently move towards wider consultation and longer-term capacity building should it wish to, whilst situating its work within the wider policy environment created by the UK’s ratification of the 2003 Convention and the DCMS Living Heritage framework.

Relevance of report

Taken together, these contexts demonstrate why the focus of this research is timely and necessary. Scholarship has highlighted the need to better integrate ICH into historic environment practice. UK ratification of the 2003 Convention and subsequent government policy have created clear expectations for more inclusive, practice-based safeguarding. HE has already engaged with ICH across wellbeing, skills, and place-making, but in a dispersed and somewhat implicit way. This project consolidates these shifts, evidencing the relationship between tangible and intangible heritage through staff perspectives and case studies. In doing so, it directly responds to the staged trajectory set out by the WSP report, offering a structured basis for HE to advance its position on ICH and to align its statutory remit with the cultural realities of heritage as it is lived and practised.

Beyond these heritage-specific shifts, the project also intersects with wider government frameworks for design and place-making, and with HE's own research agenda. Within the National Design Guide (Ministry for Housing Communities & Local Government, 2021), it contributes to characteristics of 'context' and 'identity', especially C2 ("value heritage, local history and culture") and I1 ("respond to existing local character and identity").

Within HE's Research Agenda (2017), the project sits across the 'value' and 'diversify' themes, emphasising social and contested values and explicitly engaging with "the intangible heritage of the ordinary". It speaks to at least 12 of the 21 desired research outcomes, particularly those relating to community, policy, narrative, and significance.

Why this report matters

- *Clarifies where ICH is relevant within HE's existing remit.*
- *Brings together dispersed organisational practice around wellbeing, skills, inclusion, and place-making.*
- *Responds to UK ratification of the 2003 Convention and Living Heritage framework.*
 - *Provides evidence base through staff insight and HE case studies.*
 - *Delivers the first stage of WSP recommendations to ICH.*
- *Offers a practical framework for recognising cultural practices where they inform the significance of historic places.*

Focus group findings

Introduction

The focus groups provided a dedicated space for HE staff to discuss ICH collectively. Whilst the earlier one-to-one interviews mapped a broad spectrum of perspectives across the organisation, these sessions enabled colleagues to debate definitions, reflect on challenges, share cases and perceived best practice, as well as to identify opportunities together.

By drawing staff from different roles and levels into shared discussion, the focus groups highlighted how ICH is already present in HE's work, even if often implicitly, and where there may be scope for more explicit recognition.

The findings presented here capture staff perceptions at a particular moment in time, shortly before and after the UK's ratification of the 2003 UNESCO Convention. They reflect the professional understandings, concerns, and priorities of participants, rather than constituting formal organisational policy. Nonetheless, they offer valuable insights into how HE staff understand and interface with ICH, its relationship to tangible heritage, and its potential implications for heritage sector practice.

Analysis of the discussions has been organised under four thematic clusters, reflecting the key strands of debate across both sessions:

1. Conservation depends on the intangible
2. Co-creation generates and sustains ICH
3. Structures and resources shape ICH engagement
4. ICH captures local expertise and inclusivity

The following sections present the detailed findings under each of these clusters. The words of participants are prioritised through direct anonymous quotations to show how staff themselves are making sense of ICH and its relationship to HE's remit.

Conservation depends on the intangible

Summary: *ICH was described as essential to meaningful conservation, with participants emphasising its role in sustaining skills, shaping significance, and creating emotional connections to places.*

ICH is essential for conservation

Participants consistently emphasised that safeguarding skills, traditions, and knowledge is fundamental to the care of historic fabric. Conservation was seen not just as a technical process but as an act deeply reliant on ICH. The interdependence of tangible and intangible heritage was frequently highlighted, with ICH understood to include memories, values, stories, meanings, and traditional skills tied to buildings and places.

“...at the heart of ICH is that people-focused, more emotive side of things.”

“You have ICH that creates the tangible heritage and then by engaging with your tangible heritage, you have an intangible experience from it.”

Protecting ICH was described as vital for informing conservation practice in two main ways: preserving traditional craft skills and sustaining the meaningful use of buildings.

“Safeguarding ICH would certainly inform how built heritage is conserved. If the arches in a church were unsound, and you just put a column right down the middle of it, this would negatively impact the ICH.”

“Can I just say craft skills? Because that’s a really big one. We have the designation side of things, but we also have conservation practice.”

“I think something of direct value to our work in the intangible space is craft skills.”

Some participants argued for recognising the independent significance of tangible heritage, noting that physical conservation cannot be ignored.

“It can’t only be intangible because it has a physical reality, otherwise we wouldn’t be worrying about its physical conservation.”

Yet most felt that tangible heritage is only meaningful when understood through its intangible dimensions. Values, community perceptions, and cultural experiences imbue material structures with significance.

“All heritage is intangible... Stonehenge is just a pile of rocks in the field. It has no intrinsic value at all. Its value is all attached to it.”

“You can have ICH without tangible heritage, but it doesn’t work the other way around. You can’t have tangible heritage without intangible.”



Figure 4 – Crowds watching sun rise through trilithon at Stonehenge on winter solstice
© Historic England Archive

The process of assigning significance to places was itself seen as an intangible act of human interpretation and valuation.

“The fact that something meets our criteria for being significant is an inherently intangible thing.”

“It’s valuable because of what we assign to it, the fact that we value aesthetics is again a value judgment.”

Participants also stressed how ICH contributes to distinctiveness, identity, and emotional connection. While visitors may focus on aesthetics, residents’ attachments to places are shaped by lived experiences and community histories.

“I think that the intangible is less important to people that are just visiting, just dropping in and out.”

“How do people become attached to places? By living there. By having ancestors that lived there or worked there. People and experiences, that’s what attaches people to place.”

“That sense of place is not just about where you live and work. It’s about where your heart is, it’s where you’re from, it’s where your community is from, it’s where your people come from.”

The contribution of ICH to distinctiveness was seen as essential for understanding differences between places that might appear physically similar.

“Intangible heritage is the thing that gives places their distinctiveness. Street after street of terraced houses is not distinctive, but each community is very distinctive. . . It’s not the historic fabric that makes them distinctive. It’s the ICH.”

“Intangible heritage is what makes the character of a street in Bristol very different to a street in Wolverhampton, even if it’s got the same population and a very similar design, there is something about it.”

Tangible heritage was understood to draw people in, but ICH was described as creating the deeper, sustaining connection (Figure 5).

“I think for most people you’re talking to about visiting places, there’s a kind of a popular aesthetic. A sort of heritage aesthetic and that can be real or not real. You can get entirely fabricated new places like Poundbury. . . It’s an entirely superficial thing, but it doesn’t make me feel anything.”

“It’s the tangible that brings you to a place, but it’s the intangible that keeps you there. I’ve seen some nice pictures of Canterbury. It looks nice. I’ll visit there. But it’s only once you are there you get an understanding, an appreciation of the intangible element to it; and that’s what keeps you there.”

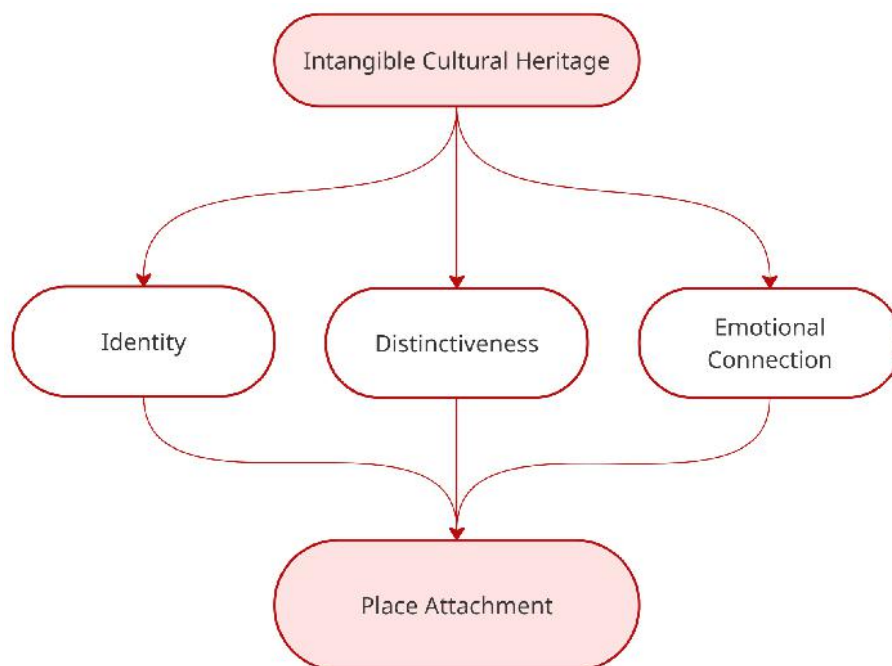


Figure 5 – Qualities felt to promote place attachment
Author original image © All Rights Reserved

‘Making the intangible visible’

Although the relationship between ICH and tangible heritage was recognised as important, participants noted that HE’s remit has focused on the physical environment. Its statutory duty restricts it to tangible heritage, yet staff acknowledged that the intangible dimensions of place are intrinsic to fulfilling this duty.

“The [1983 National Heritage] Act restricts us to physical things, doesn’t it? But I think we can’t understand what’s within our scope without understanding their intangible aspects.”

“We only have powers to protect tangibles, but where we can show a connection to practices, we’re already taking that [ICH] into account.”

“Our role is to make the intangible visible”

Examples like battlefields illustrated how places can hold powerful intangible meanings even in the absence of material remains and with only speculative work to articulate (Figure 6).

“We have a battlefields register but you won’t find any physical, tangible evidence of that activity. So it’s perpetuating like a folk memory as opposed to a thing.”

“You’re protecting a transmission of the recollection of the battle and its importance for the people, but not the battle itself.”

Staff felt HE’s strengths lay in recognising and supporting place-based ICH that is geographically rooted rather than ICH detached from historic environments (Figure 7).

“Our work is so rooted in place. And so many of the examples of the way that ICH has been defined feels more fleeting. Like it doesn’t feel rooted in place in the same way.”

“Unless it’s about a thing that happens in a particular place, then it becomes blurrier with our remit and the thing that makes us unique in what we do – which is very rooted in place.”

There was broad agreement that ICH must be reconciled with tangible heritage to fulfil HE’s purpose of enhancing lives through the historic environment, not just preserving fabric.

“I’m firmly of the belief that the reason we [HE] exist and do our work is to make people’s lives better. Some people think the reason we exist is to keep buildings standing and they don’t draw that line to the next point – to keep buildings standing in order to make people’s lives better.”

“We’re preserving the opportunity for people to continue to have an intangible experience. So, it’s not just the physical thing.”

“You really can’t have one without the other, so even if your job is to protect tangible heritage, it has to have regard to these intangible elements.”



Figure 6 – Site of The Battle of Stamford Bridge, East Riding of Yorkshire, 1066
 © Photographic discoveries with Ray, licensed for reuse under [CC BY 2.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.0/)

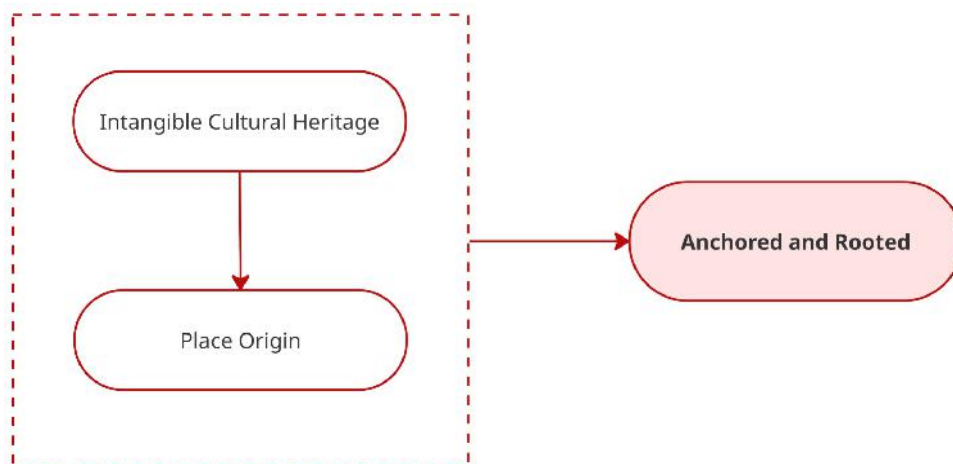


Figure 7 – Intangible heritage as an anchored and rooted cultural practice
 Author original image © All Rights Reserved

Recent initiatives within HE were cited as positive steps, including the High Streets Heritage Action Zones Cultural Programme (Figure 8), the Heritage Schools Programme, recording the memories of Bootham Crescent football ground, preserving the Ministry of Works legacy, and the Everyday Heritage Grants. These were described as important markers of change.

“And we know that works. That’s why High Streets works. That’s why it’s important. It’s because we’re suddenly interested in the places that people care about and valuing this is validation for the people who live in those places.”

“If HE is coming and saying actually we care enough to invest in your place and we think it’s important and we’re going to regenerate it and invest money in it even though it’s not listed, we’re changing our ground processes to make them more inclusive, which is a good thing.”

“And that was what I was trying to do. . . It was to try and understand ICH better to see how I could then make it into part of my daily job.”

“Thinking about the Everyday Heritage Grants programme – that is largely about ICH, but it’s very much rooted in a place. We’re quite prescriptive about how big that place can be.”



Figure 8 – Music and dance groups participating in Gosport’s Hill Street Festival parade

© Historic England Archive

However, participants admitted that those working directly with ICH remain outliers and that tangible heritage continues to dominate priorities and resources.

“...there is a subset of people at HE who are really interested in this. . . who really want change...”

“...we’re still very much in the realm of the tangible, and the intangible can be ‘attached’ to it...”

Together these perspectives show a gradual shift whereby HE is increasingly aware of the role of ICH in shaping its statutory mission.

Co-creation generates and sustains ICH

Summary: Staff felt that engaging with communities is vital for recognising and sustaining ICH. Co-creation and participatory approaches were seen as ways of bringing community knowledge, lived experience and professional expertise together, whilst also capturing the constant recreation of culture by communities.

Staff described co-creation as most valuable when tied directly to the physical fabric of heritage sites, aligning the organisation’s statutory responsibilities with lived cultural meaning. They noted that whilst community engagement is crucial, efforts must also integrate intangible qualities with the tangible environment:

“But you do have to tie it back, as I think we’ve said a few times this morning, back to the tangible heritage and that’s kind of the space where HE lives in.”

“...and it just shows in a way there is a danger of taking ICH on its own and then disassociating that from, you know, the buildings themselves.”



Figure 9 – Access to excavation in progress at Birdoswald Roman fort, Cumbria

© Historic England Archive

Co-creation was consistently framed as a way to bring together different forms of expertise – technical and institutional on one hand, and local community-based on the other. Participants stressed the importance of these being recognised and held in balance:

“There are different types of expertise – there’s community expertise that we don’t hold, but there are other places where we have expertise that the communities don’t. And for me co-creation and participation is some happy place in the middle where we actually contribute all of those things.”

“Quite often people think that co-production means handing over all control to the community doing it. There’s a difference between community-led and co-produced. Co-production is about equal partners and equal voices having the equal weight.”

“I think that’s where the balance of co-creation and expertise comes in.”

This model of shared knowledge was also seen to enhance both heritage protection and community empowerment:

“It’s sort of like assessing the skills of a community and then harnessing these skills. You work with the community to bring their skills out. I think good participatory work should do some of that.”

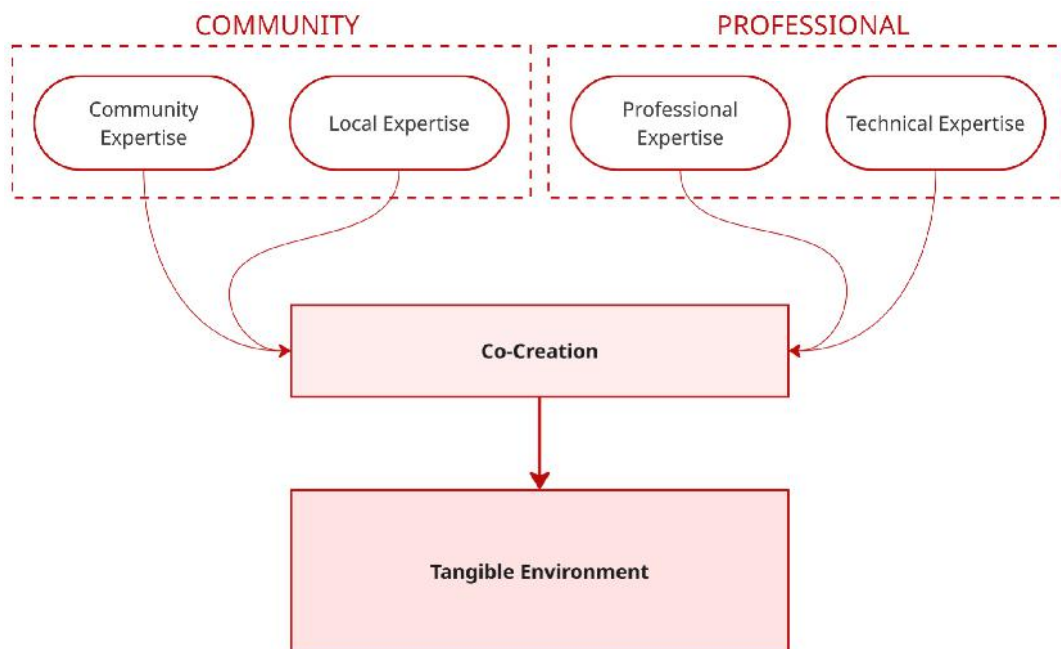


Figure 10 – The relationship between community expertise and professional expertise
Author original image © All Rights Reserved

Participants stressed that engagement should be understood as a two-way exchange, in which communities offer insight into place-based heritage and HE provides policy guidance, technical support, and structures that open up access to often forgotten histories through shared activities. This mutual process was also seen as a route to strengthening participation, particularly among younger generations:

“To be able to say to them ‘look’ – there are things in this place where you live that actually are important and are of national significance, and to engage them in learning about these things, and get them wanting to protect them. Suddenly, the graffiti on that old wall becomes a real problem because they find out their granddad helped build it.”

“I think one of the really important things in the [National Heritage] Act is that it’s not just that we have to protect things. We also have the educational role set out. We are there to help people. That’s not just councils, but communities – to look after their heritage; and so, our educational role is really important.”

Some participants viewed co-creation as more than a method – it was seen as potentially constituting ICH itself, particularly when rooted in place:

“Participation and co-creation initiatives can be ICH in and of themselves; and if they’re connected to place, then they are well within our remit.”

“I would think participation and co-creation can certainly contribute to ICH. Would they be ICH by themselves? They’re part of the process of the constant recreation of it.”

This place-based focus was repeatedly linked to the concept of ‘attachment’, with staff suggesting that participation can strengthen emotional connections to heritage and motivate long-term stewardship:

“...we want more people to be involved in looking after places to help us on our mission. We want more people to care about the places that they live and get involved. To do that, people need to care about the place and in order to care about the place, they need to feel a sense of attachment and connection to it.”

“...we need to work to help develop that attachment first.”

To support this, a range of practical engagement approaches were noted as positive contributions to the organisational toolkit for better embedding ICH within heritage practice:

- **‘Common ground’ events:** designed to uncover shared values and mutual interests.
- **Active listening:** creating space for meaningful local voices.
- **Wider use of qualitative questionnaires:** to inform project briefing and design.
- **Consultation cafés:** informal, open discussions embedded in workflow.
- **Slower designation processes:** allowing more time for public input.

“I’ve used the ‘common ground’ approach quite a lot and I find it really good. I mean, in some cases they’re kind of more like an icebreaker than anything else.”

“You can give people a questionnaire. . . or you can do things like consultation cafés, for example, if you’re doing a statement of significance people can co-create that. But it all comes down to how you use it.”

Despite this optimism, concerns were raised about safeguarding integrity of current approaches. For example, co-creation was seen to risk becoming superficial when communities are brought in after decisions have already been made:

“...it [community engagement] should be an active participation model where communities have an actual stake in the protection of heritage in all of its forms.”

Staff identified a range of broader structural and logistical barriers that hinder co-creation, including lack of training, various biases (internal, external), and an absence of embedded processes:

- **Power sharing:** a need for greater willingness to relinquish authority.
- **Sustainability:** concerns about long-term partnerships with community groups.
- **Internal perception:** in some areas, engagement is regarded as secondary rather than integral to practice.
- **Bias:** in some areas, engagement can lean towards established groups who are often white and middle class.
- **Training needs:** staff noted that participatory work requires skills that cannot be assumed and must be supported through structured training.

Additional challenges specifically concerning the co-creation process itself were also noted:

- It is labour-intensive with no standard model.
- Accessibility issues can deter involvement and limit inclusivity.
- Language and cultural barriers inhibit community trust.
- Some communities already view HE as elitist or out-of-touch.
- Diverging views among groups can be hard to reconcile.
- Funding processes can introduce additional challenges or restrictions around defining outputs.

“It takes loads of practice and time; and the real challenge is it changes every single time because the next community you’re working with, you need to adapt because it’s going to be totally different.”

“For example, there aren’t a lot of people in HE that speak Gujarati; and that is a real issue, because if you’re going to really consult with people you need to talk to them.”

In response, participants advocated for a more proactive, resourced approach to participation, including financial and developmental incentives for communities that might otherwise be excluded:

“I think doing proper community engagement or participatory work takes loads of time and loads of money. It’s twice as long and it’s twice as expensive. I think as a sector we haven’t quite wised up to that just yet.”

“...we have to get away from the idea that doing community engagement is setting up a thing and saying come along and engage with this because you’re the local community. We should be much more proactive in getting out there and working in a participatory way and being with people who actually wouldn’t work with us normally.”

“You have to create incentive in order to engage those people, and actually those are the people who really, really need to inform what we do – the people who actually don’t see us as anything to do with them.”

Lastly, participants proposed that HE could utilise the momentum on ICH interest to develop a more organisationally tailored model for co-creation that allows for more democratic input into designation, such as through community-led identification of heritage sites:

“We could almost crowd-source the list, and then we can do our HE bit with it; but we’re not making the decisions [on our own], as we need to think that there are other ways of thinking about significance as well.”

“This is why ICH is so interesting and challenging, because it is a different way of looking at it. Giving ownership to community groups and individuals. And to what extent that can change the way we actually do things; and co-create things rather than assuming.”

Structures and resources shape ICH engagement

Summary: *Colleagues identified a range of internal barriers to embedding ICH within HE's remit, despite staff interests. These included definitional uncertainties, resource pressures, and questions about how responsibilities for intangible aspects align with statutory functions.*

Resourcing constraints impact HE's capacity to engage with ICH

Participants noted that HE's prioritisation of physical heritage reflects its statutory responsibilities, but a lack of engagement with ICH stems primarily from resourcing constraints rather than legislative limitations. Whilst some intangible aspects are considered informally, they remain outside HE's formal statutory remit. This creates a tension where the organisation is stretched to meet its core obligations, leaving limited capacity to address the integration of ICH.

"The question of resourcing is separate... are we adequately resourced to do that [ICH work]?"

Another reflected on the additional effort required to address ICH based on the inherent need to ensure it is representative and informed by appropriate engagement.

"It takes more work because you have to not only figure out who to talk to, but then you have to engage them when it's not a framework that they work in. So it just comes back to this issue. It's labour intensive, and that part of the process isn't given enough resource to make it work."

Cultural shift towards local and social value

Participants felt a cultural shift within the organisation and government is necessary to broaden the focus from national to local heritage.

"It's largely a cultural shift that needs to happen internally, rather than anything that's wrong with the language."

In particular, HE's Conservation Principles, Policies, and Guidance (2008) was seen as useful but under-utilised when it comes to communal and social values.

"In the Conservation Principles [document], there are different 'values'. But the evidential value seems to hold much more weight than other things – including communal value. That's where I think our problem is. I think we and the government need to shift ourselves a little bit."

"I'm a great lover of the Conservation Principles [document]. I feel like in practice what happens is people focus on the first value, which is about the fabric – and then move onto who it is significant to."

Whilst values-based approaches remain under-utilised in relation to ICH, participants noted that HE is taking steps to broaden how heritage significance is identified through initiatives such as local listing and the 'Missing Pieces' Project (formerly 'Enriching the List'). These initiatives were discussed as recognising forms of significance that emerge through

sustained social use, collective memory, and cultural practice over time, rather than through age or architectural distinction alone. Community centres were cited as examples where heritage value may lie in long-term association and meaning, even where formal designation criteria are less readily met (Figure 11).



Figure 11 – Unlisted Leeds Caribbean and African Centre at the heart of the community

© Historic England Archive

“We’re doing a lot at the moment to get an idea of national importance that is inclusive and democratic.”

“The way you make heritage inclusive is actually focusing on the local.”

“Northampton Borough Council put together a panel to nominate things for the local list and then did a public consultation. They had a really diverse range of people on that panel. . . and therefore the nominations that came back were not council-led, but grassroots up, and they then consulted on that.”

Practical and logistical organisational challenges of ICH

Several practical and logistical challenges were highlighted concerning integrating ICH within HE. Critically, within an assumed binary assumption of heritage (tangible/intangible), tangible (physical) heritage was perceived as easier to protect than ICH. Key challenges highlighted in this regard include:

- **Definition and frameworks:** lack of clear definition and frameworks for ICH integration into planning and conservation.

- **Exclusion and limitations:** categorising ICH may create exclusions that conflict with ICH principles.
- **Statutory focus:** HE's statutory obligations create a focus that reinforces tangible heritage protection.
- **Organisational uncertainty:** no overarching directive on the organisation's role in protecting ICH, even when related to tangible heritage.
- **Evolving nature:** difficulty in protecting ICH as it evolves and changes over time.
- **Complex integration:** challenging cases can arise when integrating tangible and intangible on building projects, such as meaningful buildings without architectural significance.
- **Objectivity and exclusion:** primary focus on established values and principles within HE can exclude minority stories.
- **Resource constraints:** concerns about HE's capacity to cover both tangible and intangible.
- **Scope and organisational clarity:** variation in how roles intersect with ICH has created some uncertainty about responsibilities and expectations.
- **Historical performance and trust:** historical inadequacies in protecting ICH have led to a lack of trust.
- **Contested heritage:** challenges integrating disputed ICH (e.g. blackface Morris Dancing, fox hunting).
- **Community engagement:** distrust from communities towards heritage professionals and finding effective engagement methods.

“One of the parts of the dynamic is getting people to actually believe that we're interested in their stories. And I find that really difficult. They think ‘well, you're from HE, you're not interested in us, and me and our place.’”

Other more intellectual challenges and broader concerns noted by participants on this were:

- **ICH without tangible elements:** how can ICH be protected when the tangible aspect is destroyed or non-existent?
- **Community trust:** how can HE show communities that it cares about their stories?
- **Choosing stories:** how does HE choose which stories to tell, support, or reinforce?
- **Balancing change:** what happens when making ‘positive change’ negatively impacts ICH?

“Where something that had a depth of place, that had a depth of meaning and association and emotion, and that was going to be physically swept away, could that new place reflect any of that? And could it be done in such a way that there is commercial opportunity there?”

“We in HE come into a lot of discussions about whether we celebrate relative ICH value or just objective ICH value.”

“Our role is to decide which places we do protect. But you can’t protect every memory in every place.”

Participants felt that large-scale legislative and organisational changes may be required to better integrate ICH into organisational thinking. This was not framed as a new workstream. Instead, ICH was understood as integral to existing heritage practice and to how tangible heritage is recognised, managed, and conserved, without undermining HE’s statutory responsibilities.

“If we want to really do this in earnest, we do need an amendment to our Act [1983 National Heritage Act].”

“It’s a seismic change in the legislation, isn’t it?”

Several key approaches for integrating ICH within HE’s work were suggested, whilst ensuring alignment with existing legislation and frameworks:

- **Developing a clearer definition of ICH:** a concrete definition of ‘ICH’ within the organisation is required to guide how ICH and its inventorying links with HE’s work.

“We would need to define that in some way in order, as you say, to resource it properly.”

- **Developing a clear approach towards resourcing for ICH:** assess if HE has enough resources for ICH or how it can be integrated within existing frameworks (e.g. by expanding the concept within the framework of existing practices, rather than viewing it as a completely new category).

“We’re already handling intangible heritage all the time. It’s really a case of expanding on that. And perhaps be more explicit about it rather than it being a whole new category of stuff that we don’t know about.”

- **Allow the definition of heritage to evolve:** heritage definitions need continuous updates to mirror societal changes. HE should engage and lead in dialogue on evolving concepts of heritage.

“The danger is if we only look at meaning through the perspective of now and the people who are now experiencing using places, building structures, whatever, that can be dangerous.”

- **Ensuring inclusivity when protecting ICH:** develop projects that recognise and preserve diverse cultural expressions and traditions as part of the overarching conservation strategy.

“The community iftar here is a really new thing... but if something happened to that street... the community iftar would be unable to take place.”

- **Consider HE as the enabler of spaces for ICH:** reframe protection of physical fabric as a means to safeguard the ICH associated with it (e.g. building designs influenced by specific cultural events and urban spaces informed by festivals).

“I think locking those stories into places where those things happen. I think what we could do is enable those ICH practices to take place. So, I am thinking of those buildings with the curve to allow the cheese rolling to go around the corner.”

- **Commemorate stories associated with physical spaces beyond traditional listing:** develop a broader range of novel methods to acknowledge significance(s) that takes pressure off the listing system (e.g. diversifying funding grants, linking community engagement more explicitly to significance statements).

“I think the pressure could be removed from listing and there are other ways for us to mark significance.”

Commemorating the stories associated with physical spaces through physical markers like blue plaques was also highlighted as an effective approach.

“I think blue plaques are a good example. I think it’s storytelling, it’s literal physical marking of the place that helps open that story up to others and in theory increases people’s understanding, enjoyment, care of that place as well.”



Figure 12 – Waltham Forest Historic England style blue plaque, London
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- **Improve communication between heritage professionals and communities:** enhance communication and understanding to appreciate community values and foster mutually beneficial change. Communities think differently to heritage professionals and therefore have different perspectives and value systems.

“The public are telling us that the thing that we internally feel very focused on, which is the built historic environment, isn't as compelling for them or doesn't speak to them as strongly as the intangible and the identity.”

- **Train heritage professionals to appreciate community values:** focus on *enabling* communities to uncover and appreciate their own heritage rather than HE becoming experts in local knowledge.

“...we can't become experts in knowing about all of that community and local heritage. We can become experts in enabling communities to unlock that for themselves and we can, you know, we can become experts in that.”

- **Involve communities through cultural initiatives:** more use of cultural programmes, workshops, and storytelling methodologies to bridge the gap between community identity and the physical historic environment (Figure 13). Examples include:

- Integrate community memories into development proposals (e.g. Bootham Crescent, York)
- Use stories and storytelling as engagement methods (e.g. Heritage Schools Programme)
- Conduct focus groups that motivate people to preserve their local heritage stories
- Utilise digital tools to assist with measuring the impact of ICH

“Whilst that cultural programme did not explicitly link to the tangible, it brought people back and made them use those spaces differently.”

“It's all about the intangible. However much we say it's about tangible, it isn't. It's about using the built environment as a starting off point and then we explore the stories that are represented within that.”

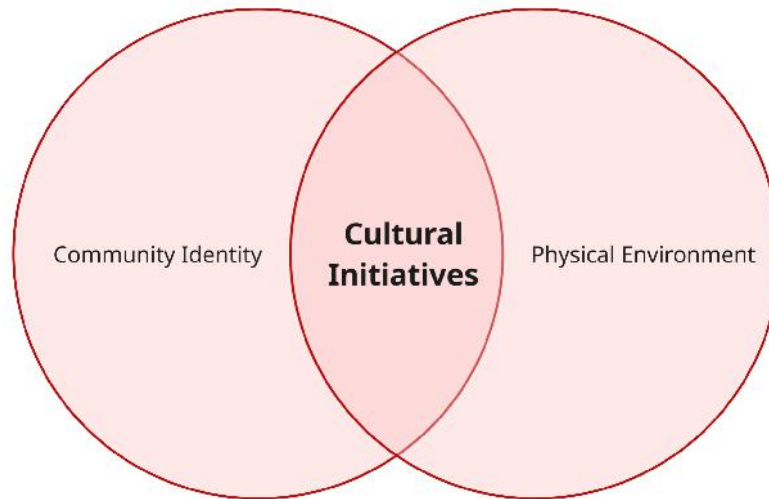


Figure 13 – Supporting identity and utilising environment within cultural initiatives
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ICH captures local expertise and inclusivity

Summary: *Participants noted that ICH provides an important lens for recognising diverse voices and local knowledge. Focusing on living heritage was seen as a way to strengthen inclusivity, enhance the relevance of heritage designations, and empower communities in decision-making.*

Balancing local heritage narratives with national importance

It was felt local heritage narratives often clash with the concept of ‘national importance’ due to current policies prioritising tangible cultural heritage. However, it was noted how there is a growing recognition within HE that local narratives, often embodying ICH, should coexist with national frameworks, creating a symbiotic relationship.

“We should be able to live in a world where local narratives and national importance are able to happily coexist within the same space.”

“I think it should be a more symbiotic relationship where we can do both. It just feels that perhaps we’re having to use ICH to capture local heritage narratives, because our other mechanisms can’t.”

It was also felt that local heritage narratives are significantly more aligned with the concept of ICH.

“Local heritage narratives are more aligned with ICH than national heritage narratives. I don’t think they necessarily have to be, but I think it’s just that these are the mechanisms we have (in terms of listing or blue plaques).”

“Talking about community activities and community action, they are by definition going to be taking place locally; so, I would agree that local heritage narratives are more aligned with ICH.”

HE's statutory role focuses on identifying and protecting heritage of national significance through designation. This does not diminish local importance, but it does mean that some places valued by local communities fall outside formal designation criteria. These decisions are shaped by the government approved Principles of Selection, rather than organisational preference. As a result, sites that carry strong local meaning may remain undesignated, even where they are central to community identity. This can create tension between nationally defined heritage frameworks and locally held heritage narratives.

“And the community was like ‘why do you want to list our Gurdwara?’ The place that really mattered to them was an old garage in the backstreets of where they lived. . . They felt this was the place that was more significant.”

“We try and make an objective decision for future generations and the locals are like ‘we don’t want this, we don’t care about this’; and sometimes it’s the other way around, where people say, ‘we value this, why aren’t you recognising it?’”

Systems that categorise heritage by scale (international, national, regional, local) reflects where decisions are made, rather than assigning inherent value. However, in practice, locally significant sites associated with smaller-scale heritage narratives can carry less weight within national designation processes. This can limit the recognition of places that are central to local identity but do not readily align with national criteria for listing.

“...there will be an application for change, and they’d say, ‘it’s OK if we harm this building because it’s only of regional importance’”

“We have this thing of – its international, national, regional, local. . . If we think of it this way, then the local is never going to be treated on an equal playing field and will always be the thing which is harmed.”

Protecting local heritage narratives to improve inclusivity

Participants felt more work is needed to improve the organisation's inclusivity and ensure a wider range of narratives are protected, not just those of 'national importance'. Key issues raised include:

- **Inconsistent local listing:** only around 70% of local authorities have local lists, and these lists are often outdated or inconsistent in coverage (Kendall et al., 2025).
- **Limited legal impact:** local listings don't carry much legal weight.
- **Variation in local decision-making:** local approaches are essential for recognising place-specific heritage, but differences in capacity and resourcing can affect how consistently stories and sites are identified across the country.

“Very often there’s this expectation that local lists will pick things up. There is definitely a really important place for local lists, but they’re so inconsistent.”

“Are local narratives given due weight? I suppose the only weight they are given is within local listing, but actually local lists are so broadly defined they aren’t protected in the same way.”

Other concerns raised about focusing more on local narratives include:

- **Misremembered or fictional narratives:** local narratives can be based on folklore or inaccuracies (Figure 14).

“There’s another set of stones nearby called the Whispering Knights. They have this little folkloric tale that they were Knights of Edward. They were conspiring about whether to murder him or not, which turned them all to stone. . . it’s not something we would necessarily take into account as part of the national importance.”

- **Selective memory:** Communities might alter or forget unpleasant aspects of their history.

“I give the example of the headstocks at Clipstone Colliery, which we listed and then funded the Trust to try and retain them as a heritage attraction. But the locals wanted them demolished, they did not want a reminder of the past of their coal mining history in Nottinghamshire.”

- **Conflict with the organisational role:** HE’s role as an authority with a focus on physical evidence.

“This is what is tricky about ICH, because we do have a role [at HE] in trying to pin it back to the evidence. This could mean challenging people’s sense of the local, when something is locally important, but not entirely correct or entirely supportable.”



Figure 14 – The Whispering Knights
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Recognition and protection beyond listing

A proposed solution by one breakout group was to move beyond relying on listing as the primary method of protection, instead identifying additional ways to recognise and support local narratives and ICH. It was felt this could alleviate concerns around the validity of local narratives and allow for a broader scope in preserving local histories. Examples included:

- **Creating or re-telling stories:** emphasising narrative connections to the historic environment.
- **Recording oral histories:** placing greater emphasis on capturing oral traditions and making them 'visible'.
- **Developing engagement opportunities:** expanding on existing work in areas such as HAZ and heritage-and-wellbeing to diversify how local narratives are recognised.

"Listing is our only mechanism for celebrating the history of a place. But there are other ways of doing it, and maybe that's something to look at in the future. . . There's other intangible ways of marking place, community and space. We shouldn't get tied into listing as our only mechanism."

"Listing is not the answer to everything..."

"It's as much a hindrance as a help [listing], but it's the thing we spend the most time on as an organisation."

However, participants also noted that any shift toward additional forms of recognition must not dilute the protections afforded by listing, as it remains the only mechanism that guarantees legal safeguarding.

"Our whole planning system defaults to this thing though, doesn't it? If a developer buys up a row of terraced houses where that garage is [that's important to the community] – there is no protection because it's not listed."

"They've got no protection unless it's listed. When push comes to shove, if it's not listed there's wobbly ground on which to stand up and defend a space."

"I know they [local authorities] can give weight to non-designated heritage assets, but I don't know if they do that enough."

Others suggested that the listing mechanism itself could be recalibrated to address localised narratives, such as enhancing or prioritising the focus on 'historic interest' over 'architectural interest'. Of note was HE's recent development of guidance focusing on 'Understanding Special Historic Interest in Listing' (see Historic England, 2024g), which demonstrates how sites can be designated based primarily on the histories and stories that relate to them, such as Bletchley Park huts in Milton Keynes (Figure 15) and 14-32 Howard Street in Bradford.



Figure 15 – Telling stories in the landscape. Marking huts at Bletchley Park.
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Case study: Bootham Crescent, York

Background

Bootham Crescent is a new mixed housing development built on the site of the former Bootham Crescent football ground. The now demolished mid-twentieth-century stadium was home to York City FC from 1932 up until their move to York (LNER) Community Stadium in 2021 (Bowser, 2021; Wood, 2021). The site, located northwest of York's historic core, previously housed the football ground, stands, associated buildings, and a car park. Whilst the site is primarily known for Bootham Crescent football ground and therefore principally valued for its part within York's footballing history, other historical narratives of the site and its immediate surroundings include: the presence of two Roman Roads and Roman cemeteries in the immediate vicinity (MAP Archaeological Practice, 2018, p. 14); its use before 1932 as home to York Cricket Club including cricket ground with pavilion and bowling green (MAP Archaeological Practice, 2018, p. 17,19); the utilisation of a tunnel at the back of the Popular Stand as an air raid shelter between 1939-1945 for Shipton Street School (Heritage Gateway, 2022; Wood, 2021); a rare occasion when it hosted baseball in the 1930s (Historic England, 2019a); and also some unpopular re-brandings including changing the club name to 'York City Soccer Club' in 2002 to develop international appeal (Porter, 2019, p. 148) and changing the stadium name to 'Kit Kat Stadium' following a sponsorship deal in 2005 (Figure 16).



Figure 16 – Former Bootham Crescent ground of York City Tigers FC, York, circa 2006

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The sale of the Bootham Crescent football ground to developer Persimmon Homes had long been in the making, with the developer initially submitting a planning application for the site

back in June 2002 (Carroll, 2008). The site was finally handed over to Persimmon in 2022 which set in motion the transformation of the former home of York City Football Club (nicknamed 'The Minstermen') into a housing estate as part of larger development plans in the area. The football ground is noted as a 'monument' and 'Non-Designated Heritage Asset' within its Historic Environment Record (HER) (Heritage Gateway, 2022; MAP Archaeological Practice, 2018, p. 4).

It is worth noting that this is the second time in the club's history where they have relocated to a new stadium and their former home utilised for housing development. Prior to moving to Bootham Crescent in 1932, the club's stadium was Fulfordgate, now a 1930s housing estate. The only thing that remains to acknowledge the original football ground is a 'Fulfordgate' street sign (Historic England, 2019a). Interestingly, the distance between Fulfordgate and Bootham Crescent is about the same as from Bootham Crescent to the club's new home, LNER Community Stadium (approximately 2.5 miles).

Scope and relevance

In 2018 a HE project was devised to understand how the memories and identity of the community associated with Bootham Crescent football ground could positively inform the new housing development set to occupy the site (Emerick, 2018, p. 4). It explicitly notes how the project is interested in "...the relationship between tangible and intangible heritage" (Emerick, 2018, p. 4). An overarching goal of the project was to "...understand and capture how meaning has been attached to the site and how the space could be arranged to reflect those meanings" (Emerick, 2018, pp. 5, 6). This kind of heritage knowledge is invaluable as it essentially posits that memory and identity can be both sustained and created on new development through a focus on intangible qualities of heritage – that is, the memories, rituals, customs, traditions, and embodied experiences of those for whom the site has meaning as a former football ground. This extends beyond the football ground itself, encompassing walking routes to the ground and local amenities where fans meet such as York Burton Stone Lane Club.

This knowledge has the capacity to demonstrate how ICH can contribute towards meeting requirements within the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) (2019) for new development, such as high-quality design, maintaining local character and sense of place (Wood, 2021, p. 21), as well as the evolving corporate interests of HE with regards to place-shaping. In this particular instance, it also serves to demonstrate adherence to Local Plan requirements relating to the safeguarding of historic character and setting (SP3) and placemaking (D1) (Persimmon Homes Yorkshire, 2018).

A public consultation took place in 2018 in the form of a local exhibition close to the site (Persimmon, 2018, p. 3). The community concerns raised relating to the site's former function as the home of York City Football Club fell in two primary categories (Persimmon, 2018):

- **The history of Bootham Crescent football ground** – concerns over how the history and historical importance of the ground will be echoed and represented in new design.
- **The loss of the football stadium** – concerns over the physical loss of the stadium in monumental terms and as a functioning sports amenity within the vicinity.

Literature review

Sport, place and identity

Sport plays a significant role in fostering community cohesion and cultural identity by bringing people together through accessible, hyper-local events that reflect shared values and traditions (see Thinks Insight & Strategy, 2024). This role of sport has been evident for hundreds if not thousands of years, with there being significant evidence of the centrality of sport within societies and cultures (Timothy, 2020, p. 523). Sport has also been utilised by towns and cities as a strategic commodity to positively contribute towards their transformation and reputation (Ramshaw & Gammon, 2015, p. 251), and sporting events can support local development whilst establishing territory (Pinson, 2017, p. 134).

The specific relationship between sport, place, and identity is also explored extensively in literature, with football stadia emerging as significant sites of cultural and emotional attachment produced at a local scale (Wood, 2011, 2021). There has been significant work undertaken already concerning the relationship between community archaeology and sport history in terms of how it can inform training, learning, and a sense of place (see Wood, 2016). This reflects the deep connection between sport, feelings of home, and sense of place, with these concepts being intrinsically linked to individuals' emotional lives (Baker, 2021). Football in particular facilitates the “transference of emotion across space”, as fans' experiences are deeply shaped by the locations where games are held (Baker, 2021). Football grounds therefore take on a *spiritual* or *symbolic* importance, with the journey to the stadium often functioning as a form of pilgrimage for supporters (Baker, 2021; Edensor et al., 2023, p. 1; Timothy, 2020, p. 418). In short – football grounds are “repositories of memory” (Wood, 2019). Yet despite this, there is limited representation of football grounds within the National Heritage List for England, and commemoration has typically been limited to football personalities and events rather than the grounds themselves (Wood & Gabie, 2011, p. 1186).

Relocation, memory, and continuity

Stadium relocations are common and often driven by the desire for larger, more modern facilities, resulting in stadia typically being pushed out of city centre locations towards the peripheries which are more affordable and allow for greater capacity. The key issue with such relocations is how the identity of clubs is often rooted within the historic environment of the city itself (Nosal & Kossakowski, 2024, p. 3) – meaning any such relocation can significantly impact the sense of belonging for fans. There is precedent for memorialising

former stadiums which includes: the utilisation of basic plaques to commemorate centre spots (Christie Park, former Morecombe Football Club ground); echoing the former ground within street names (Roker Park, former Sunderland A.F.C ground); the installation of artworks/sculptures as “symbolic allusions” that mark important places such as a penalty spot (Ayresome Park, former Middlesbrough F. C ground) (Gabie, 2001; Wood & Gabie, 2011) (Figure 17); the utilisation of blue plaques to mark key locations or events (Victoria Ground, former Stoke City F.C ground); the reuse and incorporation of existing stadium structure into new development (Highbury Stadium, former Arsenal Football Club ground); responding to the original football ground plan form or orientation within new proposals (The Dell, former Southampton F. C ground) (Historic England, 2019a); or just straightforward abandonment (Bradford Park Avenue, former Bradford A. F. C ground) (Wood, 2016, p. 754, 2019). Wood (2020) states weak examples of stadia memorialisation include those that: ignore the previous football ground layout; offer token references to the former ground (such as the aforementioned street names and plaques); and do not integrate public space within new design.



Figure 17 – Ayresome Park penalty spot sculpture

Marking the penalty spot at former Middlesbrough FC ground. Part of 'The Trophy Room' series by Neville Gabie

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When a football club relocates and an original stadium is lost, the emotional impact on fans is considerable. This sense of loss can be acute due to fans’ identities being closely tied to these physical spaces, which serve as repositories of memories and collective experiences (Barnes & Harland, 2024, p. 1; Edensor et al., 2023, p. 1; Wood, 2011). Examples include the relocation of Manchester City Football Club from Maine Road to the Etihad Stadium in

2003, which left many fans feeling “bereft” and “disorientated” (Edensor et al., 2023); and Arsenal’s move from Highbury to the Emirates Stadium in 2006 which resulted in feelings of “placelessness” and “dispossession” (Barnes & Harland, 2024, pp. 3–4) (Figure 18). Place-making initiatives centred around heritage, nostalgia, and fan culture were subsequently introduced to help foster a new sense of home at the Etihad, and similarly at Emirates there was a process of “Arsenalisation” that the club funded to recreate a sense of home, heritage, and place, that had been so strongly associated with the original ground (Barnes & Harland, 2024, pp. 1–2).



Figure 18 – Retained structure of former stadium at Highbury Park
Now adapted as part of residential overhaul of Arsenal's former stadium
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This process primarily employed “graphic heritage” which involves the utilisation of visual symbols and communication to convey meaning across time, functioning as a dynamic process of identity-making, memory creation, and social interaction (Barnes & Harland, 2024, p. 4). By evoking nostalgia and cultural memory, graphic heritage serves as a tool to maintain connections with the past, even in changing environments – as seen in its application in branding, place-making, and the emotional anchoring of communities within relocated spaces (Barnes & Harland, 2024, p. 4). This reflects how much sporting activities and groups often rely upon the past for learning (Timothy, 2020, p. 34). The interpretative utility of graphic heritage has been further explored as a potential development tool for UNESCO for connecting heritage and design (Harland et al., 2024) (Figure 19).



Figure 19 – Urban graphic heritage at Liverpool's maritime site

Developed to support the location and its heritage

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Football stadia are powerful in shaping cultural practices and fostering social cohesion, making them effective (and affective) spaces for creating a lasting sense of identity that binds people to specific geographic places (Samuel et al., 2022). It is therefore unsurprising that the presence of football stadia informs, develops, and changes social practices both spatially and culturally within its vicinity (Samuel et al., 2022, pp. 570–571). Compounding this is the relationship between physical ‘things’ and sense of identity, which within the context of football fandom are inseparable, with physical fabric able to act as a “palimpsest of memory and narratives” (Baker, 2017, p. 626).

For football ‘places’, this could relate to physical buildings (e.g. stadium or associated buildings); open spaces (e.g. the pitch); landscape and natural materials (e.g. earth, turf); and the physical components of buildings or those attached to them (e.g. turnstiles, seating, graffiti, or other memorabilia) (Baker, 2017). Football stadia are therefore far more than functional spaces for sporting events – they are crucial to the identity and sense of belonging that fans develop (Wood, 2011). Any disruption to these physical sites will consequently have profound disruption to their physical and intangible heritage, leading to further emotional and social consequences that could impact fan wellbeing. Even with efforts to recreate a sense of home and continuity, the emotional and cultural connection to the original site remains a deeply rooted aspect of football fandom, which commands a high degree of sensitivity when considering new design in these emotionally charged cultural places.

ICH findings

Sport and heritage are deeply connected with many overlapping interests, such as tourism, nostalgia, collective memory, monumentalism, and intergenerational transmission (Ramshaw, 2023; Ramshaw & Gammon, 2005). Ramshaw and Gammon (2005) identified four characterisations of “sport heritage” nearly twenty years ago: 1) tangible immovable; 2) tangible movable; 3) intangible; and 4) goods and services. Within this, the concept of ‘sporting heroes’ has also been highlighted as equating to tangible and intangible heritage (Gammon, 2014), alongside the increasing relevance of fandom as part of sport heritage (Ramshaw & Gammon, 2017). Thus, sport as a cultural ‘theme’ adequately captures both the tangible (e.g. sporting venues and their heroes) and the intangible (e.g. sporting events and achievements) (Timothy, 2020, p. 523).

Interface between tangible and intangible heritage

The relationship between tangible and intangible heritage manifests as the relationship between place and memory, and how the club’s fanbase could be involved in exploring this relationship. Despite there being numerous football stadia located to new sites over the past two decades, Bootham Crescent is the first project to place attention specifically on the memorialisation of the redundant stadium (Topping, 2021). This focus acknowledges how Bootham Crescent has long been a cornerstone of community identity in York, with a history that extends beyond football and to deeply personal experiences and emotional attachments to the site. The project takes the view that heritage is a present-day action or activity which can inspire, inform, and provide sense of belonging or *genius loci* (Historic England, 2008, p. 32; Topping, 2021). This rests on the belief that values are *applied* to built heritage and are not intrinsic (L. Smith, 2006; L. Smith & Akagawa, 2009, p. 7).

Various community initiatives have taken place both at the original site and new community stadium to achieve successful interplay between memory and place across various media and forms of engagement:

- **Documentary films:** a series of seven short films made to document the project. These films represent various views and were utilised as a methodological tool for documenting fan memories. They were also utilised as a prompt to keep discussions about Bootham Crescent active and present in the minds of local stakeholders.
- **Archaeological dig:** ahead of redevelopment at the Bootham Crescent site, there was a call out to fans to be part of archaeological dig to find buried fans’ ashes on the pitch. It was acknowledged that there was upwards of two hundred people’s ashes buried on the site, warranting an excavation project which uncovered between fifteen and twenty fans’ ashes buried underneath the pitch (BBC, 2021; Topping, 2021; Wood, 2019).

- **Closing events:** a series of closing events were organised at Bootham Crescent where fans had the opportunity to engage with the ground and share their own personal stories with others. Events included: a 'Season Finale Dinner' and 'Awards Night'; and 'End of an Era Banquet'; a 'City Heroes Farewell Game'; an opportunity to play football on the ground; and a 'Moving Home Auction' giving fans the opportunity to purchase physical artefacts and components (memorabilia) of the original ground (e.g. fixtures and fittings) (York Mix, 2018).

These activities had the following impact on the York and footballing communities:

- **Transference of power:** conversations and engagement with various stakeholders of Bootham Crescent were utilised to generate feelings of ownership and pride over the heritage and history of the football ground.
- **Changing perceptions of people:** local people and communities were engaged in a way that encouraged them to perceive themselves as the 'heritage experts' of their place (Emerick, 2018, p. 9).
- **Changing perceptions of place:** supporting local people and communities to perceive their place as an important heritage site worthy of exploration, memory work, and interpretation.
- **Changing perceptions of heritage:** convincing local people, stakeholders, and those in positions of power that heritage does not have to be very old or architecturally significant to have value.

The design of the project did not include any further engagement activities beyond the initial phase, hoping for any future initiatives to emerge organically from the fans and the club. The utility of the project was in helping the community occupy and take ownership over the heritage management process of the site over time, reflecting the dynamic nature of cultural memory and heritage.

At the original stadium, the priority has been helping fans recall and communicate memories of the place to support them through the process of losing their football ground. Incorporating a sense of continuity and interplay between tangible and intangible heritage in the new residential design will help fans physically orientate themselves and the lost stadium within the context of the new housing development. The provision of accessible physical space for fans to anchor their memories in the built environment will also support reflection and contemplation of York's history.

Some of the key design approaches utilised within the proposed residential development at the original site to support interplay between tangible and intangible include (Figure 20):

- **Orientation and layout:** design of the new residential estate conforms to the original orientation of the football ground, which ensures that any retained elements make sense within the overall layout of the site and supports the ability to recognise where the demolished football ground was located (Emerick & Wood, 2020).
- **Retention of physical elements in new design:** part of the new residential development will integrate key physical remnants of the original ground. This includes a 6m length of the 'Popular Stand', which incorporates the historic terrace and tunnel beneath which once served as an air raid shelter. The location of the centre circle will also remain intact through the provision of public open green space (Topping, 2021). Additionally, there will be the retention of the 'five-minute flag' location at the grounds through the installation of a replica flag – a symbolic feature that was lowered for fans to indicate when there was five minutes of match time left (Wood, 2019).
- **Reuse of materials and structures for alternative purposes:** the transformation of original materials and structures for new functions includes the repurposing of the old wooden seats at the stadium as caskets to transfer fans' ashes for reintering at the new football ground. The retained portion of the Popular Stand will also be consolidated using existing materials from around the grounds to facilitate its repurposing as a memorial garden (the Garden of Memory), offering a reflective space that honours the memory of the site's past. The garden also contains soil recovered from the areas of pitch where the fans' ashes were located, adding an additional layer of material symbolism to this dedicated memorial location.

Alongside these site-based approaches are others that are not directly based at the original Bootham Crescent ground but still play a key role in understanding the relationship between memory and the physical site itself. There was the deconstruction of the original football ground into a series of mementos – various physical components that were auctioned off as keepsakes, including commonplace items such as the turnstiles, seats, signs, fixtures, fittings, dressing room doors, and even urinals and toilet seats (Gray, 2022; Topping, 2021; York Mix, 2018). This echoes Wood's (2016, p. 754) framing of archaeology as a 'device' that can support a sense of community. Whilst these physical artefacts have been removed from the site itself, they have the power to focus memories back to the site where people interacted within them, including the ability to stimulate memories of associated sights, sounds and smells (Miształ, 2003, p. 16).



Figure 20 – Overlay of proposed master plan over 2017 aerial of Bootham Crescent

Point A – location of retained stand and new 'Garden of Memory'; Point B – retained centre circle in the landscape; and Point C – reinstallation of a replica 'five-minute flag'

Author original image © All Rights Reserved

The utilisation of 'graphic heritage' at the new stadium was also employed to help maintain connections to the history and memories of the former football ground (as per Barnes & Harland, 2024). For example, in 1991 one of the original Bootham Crescent stands ('The Shippo') was refurbished and renamed the 'David Longhurst Stand' in memory of the York City player who tragically lost his life on the pitch during a match in 1990 (Bowser, 2021) (Figure 21). The story of Longhurst is now synonymous with the football club's history and the development of the Bootham Crescent ground, with embodied experiences, personal memories, and feelings of comfort, all entangled within a sad story:

“For me the David Longhurst Stand became a space free of the concerns of the outside world. Here in the comforting gloom I could meet old friends, make new ones, sing, chant, laugh, and now and then, almost incidentally, enjoy watching a game of football.”
(Cole, 2021)



Figure 21 – Bootham Crescent original David Longhurst Stand
Photo of York City versus AFC Telford United, 2009
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Figure 22 – David Longhurst portrait on 'City Wall' at LNER Community Stadium
Memory of David Longhurst carried over into the new stadium
© York City Football Club. All Rights Reserved

This act of remembrance has been carried over into LNER Community Stadium with a 'David Longhurst' banner placed above the South Stand (York City Football Club, 2023), as well as a portrait of Longhurst on the 'City Wall' (a wall of tiles containing a personal message from those who have purchased them) (Figure 22). This graphic heritage also demonstrates how sporting heroes can be re-framed into "heritage objects" which are then utilised to represent and intergenerationally transmit their achievements after they are gone (Gammon, 2014, p. 251). The memorialisation of the footballer will also be carried over into the new housing development, with one of the streets named 'David Longhurst Way' (Figure 23).



Figure 23 – Constructing 'David Longhurst Way'

A street within the proposed housing development that will be named after the footballer who tragically lost his life during a match at Bootham Crescent

DS Pugh CC BY-SA 2.0

Looking ahead, several spin-off projects have been proposed to maintain engagement with the memories of Bootham Crescent at the site of the former football ground. These projects draw on the intangible qualities of the place, such as augmented reality experiences and recreated soundscapes (Wood, 2019). The core aim of these initiatives is to evoke a sense of 'placement' which facilitates a sense of reconnection with the original football ground. This is achieved by using physical memory anchors and innovative memorialisation methods to revive fan memories – occurring both at the new housing estate built on the site and at the new community stadium. This act of 'placing' illustrates how tangible and intangible elements work together to support both memory recall and memory making practices (Figure 24).

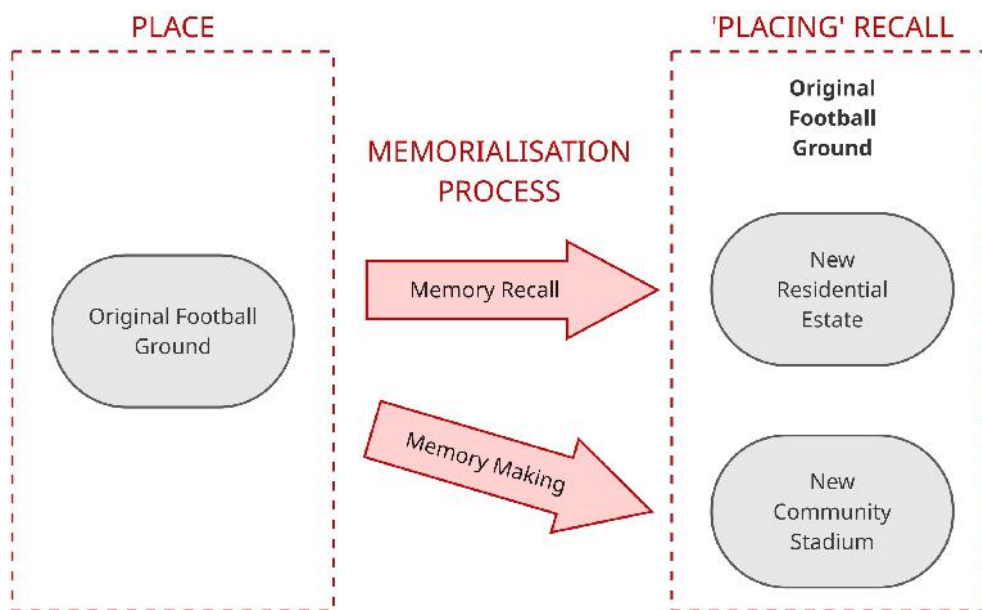


Figure 24 – The 'placing' process

A mixture of 'memory recall' and 'memory making' helps sustain the 'original' Bootham Crescent across various locations

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Challenges

There have been challenges relating to how the memorialisation process, which essentially catalyses and reinforces stories at the original site, impacts the perception and acceptance of the new site by fans. Ultimately it comes down to perceptions of the relationship between memory and physical places, and how stakeholders can carefully manage this relationship to support the relocation process. On the one hand, there is a strong feeling by fans that memories are not necessarily lost through demolition and relocation – they can move with and be sustained through the people who lived through those experiences. Yet on the other hand there has clearly been significant resource invested in memory recall activity at the original ground ahead of its demolition, which does reflect an anxiety over potential loss. Certainly, there are aspects of the original experience of watching a football match at Bootham Crescent that cannot be recreated at the new or redeveloped locations, such as walking routes to the original football ground.

Complicating this matter further has been the matter of *continuity* – the strive for adequate balance between notions of tradition and innovation. The club needed a new home with modernised accessible facilities yet equally wanted to secure a sense of cultural continuity for its present and future generations of fans. Hence why a significant challenge for the fans and football club was the relationship between the club's history and its new stadium, LNER Community Stadium. A key aspect of this was considering how heritage could be created at the new stadium (Emerick & Wood, 2020). Ways of achieving this have included: the relocation of moveable elements from the old ground to the new stadium such as the clock above the Popular Stand; the reintering of excavated ashes at the new stadium; and the aforementioned memory work relating to David Longhurst. However, as the new community

stadium is also home to York Knights (rugby league club), it would be inappropriate for it to become overly focused on York City footballing history and heritage. There was also a broader economic challenge concerning the impact of the relocation on surrounding business near Bootham Crescent. For example, the neighbouring York Burton Stone Lane Club which was a fundamental aspect of the match day experience saw a significant dip in revenue due to the loss of fans in the vicinity and was eventually forced to fund its own refurbishment to attract new members (Starkey, 2019; York Press, 2018).

Strategies and outcomes

This section focuses on the specific strategies taken during the Bootham Crescent project, detailing the methods employed, actions taken, and their direct effects on heritage conservation, community involvement, and urban redevelopment. These summary points are project-specific and describe how the redevelopment achieved its goals:

- **Community co-creation in heritage management:** the project engaged local community members in the redevelopment process, involving them in documenting memories, archaeological digs, and closing events. This approach ensured the safeguarding of both tangible and intangible elements meaningful to those emotionally connected to the stadium. Whilst initial activities involved structured involvement, a key strategy was the project's shift towards community-led initiatives. The decision not to plan further activities but to give the fans and club space to continue engaging with the heritage of Bootham Crescent on their own terms reflects an innovative approach towards cultural heritage management.
- **Spatial continuity and design integration:** the project retained the orientation and key spatial elements of the former football ground in the new development. This included preserving the location of the centre circle and integrating part of the 'Popular Stand' into the layout. Such spatial continuity ensured that the new development honoured the physical memory of the place, allowing both old visitors and new residents to spatially (re)connect with the history embedded in the site.
- **Creative memorialisation approaches:** by creatively reusing materials and incorporating symbolic elements, the project embedded commemorative features as a key component of the new design strategy. Examples include using stadium materials for new purposes (e.g., repurposing wooden seats) and establishing the Garden of Memory. These approaches went beyond standardised material conservation methods, by reconceptualising the physical site as a vessel for memory that can facilitate both personal and communal reflection.
- **Economic and emotional anchoring:** memorialisation strategies preserved the emotional connection to the site and may also provide economic benefits. The cultural significance embedded into the development has made it more attractive to potential residents, whilst the retained physical elements have added cultural value

through their historical resonance, encouraging long-term care and a shared sense of responsibility for the development.

- **Sustaining intangible heritage in physical space:** the project demonstrates how intangible heritage – such as memories of match days, personal stories, and community rituals – could be transferred and sustained in a transformed physical environment. Through a desire to incorporate these intangible elements into the redeveloped site, physical development has needed to respond accordingly to ensure it can remain a ‘living’ part of the football community’s collective memory.

Transferrable insights

The Bootham Crescent project offers wider lessons for managing major change at sites where everyday use and emotional attachment are central, but formal designation may be limited. The insights below are framed to be applicable to other communal settings such as music venues, exhibition grounds, parks, market sites, and civic complexes.

- **Treat relocation as a multi-sited heritage process**
Rather than viewing closure and redevelopment as a single planning event, heritage work should be understood as unfolding across three geographies: the original site, the receiving site(s), and the dispersed locations where artefacts, stories, and rituals continue. Strategies can then be developed which recognise this network of places as a linked “memory infrastructure”, rather than concentrating solely on what happens within the red line boundary of redevelopment.
- **Use memory work as design evidence, not just interpretation**
Structured elicitation of memories, narratives, and everyday routines can provide a brief for new development, informing orientation, spatial hierarchy, naming, and material choices. Treating this material as design evidence (equivalent to historic mapping or fabric surveys) helps ensure that ICH shapes the form and language of new proposals rather than being confined to interpretative outputs at the end of the process.
- **Work with non-designated assets through design where protection is limited**
Where sites are not formally protected, continuity can still be secured through design moves that echo former layouts, key alignments, thresholds, or vantage points, and through the considered reuse of fragments. This offers a route for planning authorities and developers to respond to communal value even when conventional statutory tools are weak or absent.
- **Integrate memorialisation into everyday use**
Memorial elements are most effective when embedded in ordinary patterns of movement and occupation (e.g. within routes, shared spaces, or landscape structure), rather than isolated as standalone markers. Designing commemorative

features to be used, passed through, and noticed as part of daily life helps sustain cultural memory over time and reduces the risk of memorials becoming detached from lived experience.

- **Design for future community authorship and stewardship**

Heritage-led redevelopment does not end at practical completion. Leaving room (spatially and procedurally) for communities to continue adding to, curating, and reinterpreting the site, through events, installations, digital overlays, or informal practices, can be as important as initial project-led activity. Planning for this “afterlife” from the outset encourages long-term care and allows community-led initiatives to extend and adapt memorialisation as meanings shift.

These insights move beyond the specifics of Bootham Crescent to offer a set of transferable principles for any project seeking to hold together tangible change and the continuity of lived, intangible connections to place.

Case study: Heritage Building Skills Programme

Background

The Heritage Building Skills Programme (HBSP) is a training and apprenticeships opportunity ran by HE in the North of England (Historic England, 2024e). It was originally known as the Hamish Ogston Foundation Heritage Building Skills Programme until October 2023 and was only made possible through a significant initial donation. Across a five-year period beginning in 2021, trainees have been equipped with trade skills relevant to the care of the historic environment through activities such as mentoring, on-site training, placements, and site visits (Harlow Consulting, 2022, p. 3; Historic England, 2024e, 2024d). The programme is structured across three tiers of opportunities, reflecting progression within trades and offering optionality with regards to progression routes (Harlow Consulting, 2022, p. 5; Historic England, 2024e) (Figure 25):

1. **Prepare:** placements introducing existing construction students to heritage skills.
2. **Enter:** apprenticeships with heritage construction firms working towards qualification.
3. **Sustain:** placements and training that focus in on specialist heritage skills.

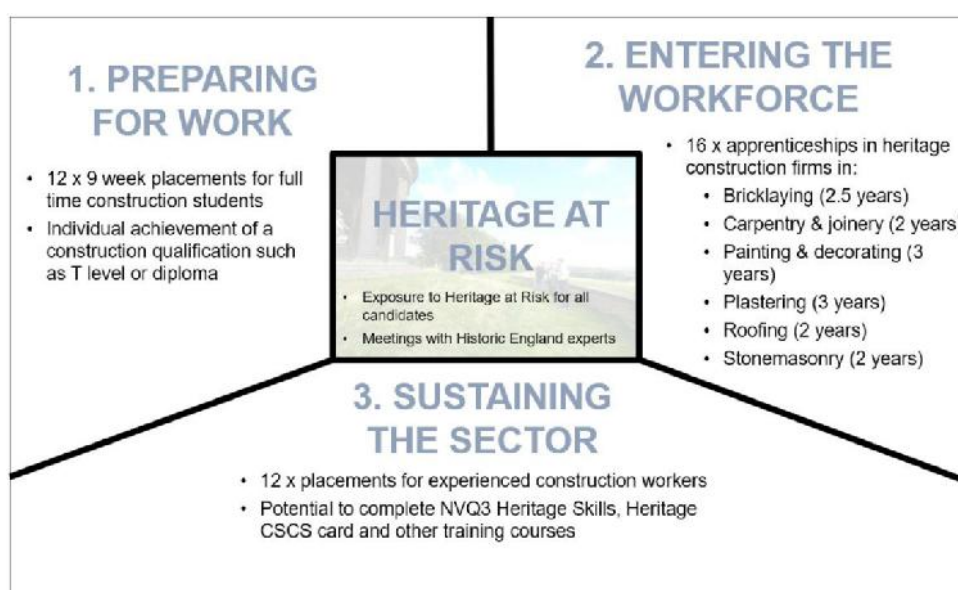


Figure 25 – Historic England's three-tier training model

A training model of vocational training that responds to different career points

Historic England © All Rights Reserved

The programme considers how the construction sector could help sustain and pass on skills (particularly conservation building crafts) through the provision of work-based skills training (Harlow Consulting, 2024b, p. 1). More specific aims that the programme seeks to address includes support for 'Heritage at Risk' sites as well as providing additional career support for underprivileged young people (Historic England, 2024a).

The HBSP directly responds to concerns that the demand for heritage construction skills will outmatch supply in the future (Brennan et al., 2024a; Historic England, 2024a), and takes the position that vocational education should train the exact skill(s) the sector is lacking (Norton, 2022, p. 75). Earlier commissioned research by HE highlighted how the combination of an ageing workforce, business-related barriers, and inadequate training infrastructure has led to the current context of there being insufficient training available (Harlow Consulting, 2024b, pp. 4–5). This is compounded by insufficient promotion of traditional skills to younger generations (Brennan et al., 2024b, p. 6).

Scope and relevance

The HBSP is one of many HE initiatives designed to address the critical skills shortage in heritage conservation whilst ensuring the continuity of traditional building craft and skill knowledges. The programme integrates hands-on, site-based training with off-site skills learning and broader theoretical knowledge development, equipping participants with the specialist skills required to restore and maintain historic structures.

This case study is relevant because it explicitly explores the relationship between tangible heritage (the historic buildings and materials being conserved) and ICH (the knowledge, skills, know-how, and techniques required for their conservation). The HBSP focuses on repairing physical structures as well as actively sustaining the cultural practices and craft traditions that give these structures their perceived sense of authenticity and integrity.

The programme also reflects the growing recognition of heritage as a people-centred process, shifting the focus from static preservation to active engagement with communities and craftspeople. By embedding traditional skills development within projects, the HBSP highlights how heritage practices can adapt to modern contexts, ensuring that skills are preserved whilst also remaining relevant. Furthermore, the programme's approach to training reflects the principles of applying intangible heritage to the design of historic contexts, by demonstrating how crafts and techniques can influence contemporary conservation strategies and enrich the design of new interventions within historic environments.

The HBSP offers a distinctive view of how ICH can shape tangible outcomes, showing how traditional craftsmanship can be integrated into contemporary heritage practice. Its relevance reaches beyond conservation, touching on sustainability, community participation, and the future of skilled crafts within a changing built-environment sector. A central element is the annual Summer School, which places trainees in a live conservation setting where they negotiate competing perspectives, priorities, and disciplines (Historic England, 2024d, p. 1). This format moves away from siloed practice by fostering cross-disciplinary thinking. It is designed to expose trainees to the realities of the building sector, requiring sound judgement, applied knowledge, and practical skill in situations that balance the needs of diverse stakeholders (Historic England, 2024e).

Literature review

Intangible heritage and the safeguarding of traditional skills

At the turn of the century there was a heightened concern from UNESCO about the impact of globalisation and the loss of local skills (UNESCO, 2002, p. 26), which, as part of a broader lineage of literature development, contributed to the eventual publication of the 2003 Convention (UNESCO, 2003). ICH is primarily concerned with the cultural transmission ('safeguarding') of practices, knowledges, and skills (Dippon & Moskaliuk, 2020, p. 450; UNESCO, 2003). It also includes "...the instruments, objects, artifacts and cultural spaces associated therewith..." that support intergenerational transmission of heritage (UNESCO, 2003, p. 3). The 2003 Convention explicitly highlights "traditional craftsmanship" as an ICH "domain" and therefore a form of cultural practice that can be representative of cultural identity for communities and groups (UNESCO, 2003, p. 3). The safeguarding of traditional skills is ultimately concerned with ensuring the viability, transmission, and revitalisation of these skills (UNESCO, 2003, p. 3).

It has already been established elsewhere that heritage can be a key driver in the acquisition of skills (Blamire et al., 2022, p. 3). Yet whilst skills are often viewed through the lens of traditional crafts, the term can also refer to more generalised workplace and manual skills, as well as the skills of artists, tradesmen and mechanics (Aktürk, 2020, p. 144; Bray et al., 2021, pp. 2–3; L. Smith & Akagawa, 2009, p. 7; R. Smith, 2009, p. 20). Heritage skills can therefore comprise more general through to more specialised skillsets (Orbaşlı, 2008, p. 8). Skills are not just about the end products that are created through the enactment of the skill (such as functional or ornamental building elements) but also about forms of knowledge and know-how that inform its practice (Aikawa-Faure, 2009, p. 27), as well as the people who embody the skill and *perform* them within contemporary contexts (Bakar et al., 2011, p. 3). Specific skills can therefore have strong associations with specific places, as well as certain individuals (or "carriers") of the skills (R. Smith, 2009, p. 17). This connection that skill has with local communities and local heritage reflects the place-based nature of skills (and ICH more broadly), in terms of how it can reflect the cultures, traditions, and resources made available to specific communities (Aktürk, 2020, p. 135; UNESCO, 2011, p. 8).

Heritage building skills, evolution, and social value

Within the context of the HBSP, it is the skills specifically for working with historic structures that are of importance, such as those constructed with traditional materials (e.g. lime mortar, straw, lath and plaster) using traditional methods (e.g. solid wall construction, period decoration, raised timber floors). A key date for these traditional building skills in the construction sector is 1919, which is a common benchmark in the heritage sector to differentiate between buildings that were constructed using 'pre-modern' techniques and materials (pre-1919) and those constructed using modern materials and methods (Brennan et al., 2024b, p. 4). These pre-1919 assets account for around 20% of existing housing and approximately 500,000 of these are designated heritage assets (Kaveha et al., 2018, p. 33;

McPeake, 2013) with a projected work demand of £15 billion for those more specialised heritage skills (Brennan et al., 2024b, p. 4).

The pre-1919 benchmark is not fixed within policy or legislation, but can be thought of as an industry standard, appearing in plenty of HE guidance as well as the British Standards *Guide to the Conservation of Historic Buildings* (BS 7913:2013) (British Standards Institution, 2013). The underpinning rationale is straightforward – buildings constructed before 1919 typically need to ‘breathe’ and those constructed afterwards typically do not (Norton, 2022, p. 71). If relatively intact, buildings pre-dating this year will usually feature forms of craftsmanship reliant on materials such as lime, timber, and stone, requiring specialised heritage skills to work with and to conserve their perceived ‘significance’. Upon narrowing the field to pre-1919 ‘heritage’ skills, the knowledges and skillsets required naturally tend to become more specialist, with the maintenance, conservation, adaptation, and retrofit of those historic places requiring more in-depth knowledge of the factors and mechanisms that inform decision-making (Brennan et al., 2024b, p. 3). This reflects The Heritage Crafts Association’s definition of heritage crafts as practices requiring “...a high degree of hand skill at the point of production and have been active in the UK for two or more generations” (The Heritage Crafts Association, 2023, p. 2). Note the intergenerational component to this definition.

The specialised skills required to repair, conserve, or retrofit pre-1919 historic assets have been in decline for decades, despite their ability to better appreciate the asset’s inherent construction methods, environmental needs, and cultural significance. This is driven by a number of complex issues within the broader construction industry, such as the shift towards modern construction methods, a shrinking pool of ageing practitioners, a low perception of craft’s value, and fragmented training and vocational opportunities which are of poor quality (Corr et al., 2019, p. 56; Norton, 2022; Partarakis et al., 2021, p. 124; Pöllänen, 2009, p. 250). The Heritage Crafts Association (2023, p. 3) neatly summarise this as: 1) a reduction in relevant specialist education and training; and 2) a devaluation of human skills.

Unquestionably, prefabrication and production automation are informing the direction of travel for the construction industry which places craft skills in a position whereby *evolution* is essential (Fyhn & Søraa, 2017). However, this does not need to be a binary scenario where technology and modernisation supersedes those skills (Bray et al., 2021, p. 1), with emphasis on fostering innovation, skills transfer, and knowledge-sharing in relation to skills having the capacity to sustain both traditional and emerging heritage professions (Corr et al., 2019).

The increasing focus on ‘social value’ and the social utility of heritage is also competing for limited sector resources, with some highlighting how new and emerging heritage skills relating to participation, engagement and mediation with communities are just as important and in need of resource as traditional skills relating to physical fabric (Clark, 2019, p. 263; Djabarouti, 2024c). This reflects the diverse nature of the heritage sector and the need to balance a variety of professional skills and priorities (Djabarouti & O’Flaherty, 2020, p. 424;

van Lakerveld et al., 2017, p. 11). Certainly, skills specifically related to the conservation of historic structures requires innovative thinking that bridges diverse areas of practice, and achieving balance between physical heritage and intangible practices necessitates transdisciplinary approaches that bring together stakeholders and expertise (Wells, 2017, p. 38). Hence why, as a form of “living heritage”, heritage skills can be comfortably understood within the context of social value (Walter, 2020, p. 132) (Figure 26). For example, it has already been noted by ICCROM (2015, p. 3) that local community engagement can inform and shape specialist skills, and there is increasing interest in the use of digital technologies to innovate or realign existing heritage skills within society (Partarakis et al., 2021, p. 125) – such as employing digital storytelling of artefacts associated with particular skills to increase engagement and interest (Partarakis et al., 2021).

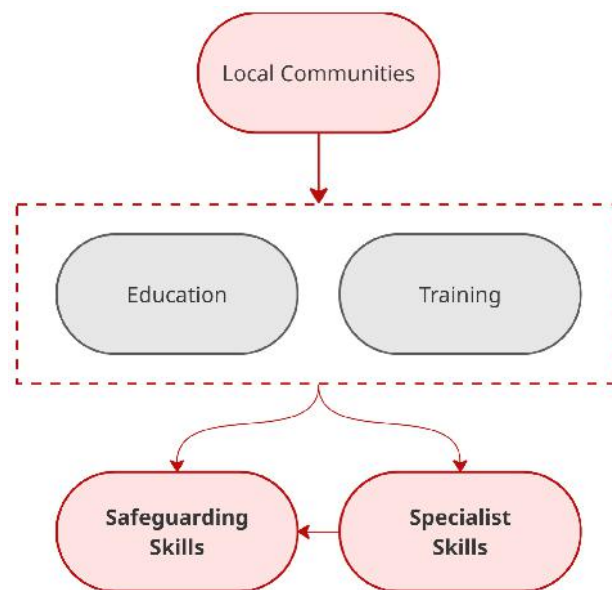


Figure 26 – Skills, Safeguarding, and societies
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Certainly, organisations like UNESCO acknowledge that a variety of educational initiatives are typically required in contemporary society to ensure traditional skills are safeguarded and passed down to younger generations (UNESCO, 2019, p. 5). There is also work that suggests how engagement through hands-on activities exploring site-based skills can foster community cohesion, wellbeing, and place-attachment – especially through making links between youth and the past (Langlands, 2024, pp. 21–22; McPeake, 2013).

Despite these opportunities for supporting social value, some communities are not interested in their skills being formally acknowledged as heritage due to the various national and global touristic constraints that this may place on the evolution of the practice (Bortolotto, 2013, p. 266; Caust & Vecco, 2017; Staubermann, 2020, p. 33). However, with an ageing workforce, and those with the skills and knowledge either retiring or passing away, intergenerational transmission of skills through traditional on-the-job training is becoming increasingly vital yet progressively difficult to achieve (Brennan et al., 2024b, p. 14).

ICH findings

With heritage skills training and growth relying primarily on informalized models, alongside other issues within the sector such as negative perceptions of retrofit and training capacity issues, the HBSP was designed to actively “...maintain the country’s traditional buildings and pass down skills and knowledge to the next generation...” (Brennan et al., 2024b, p. 5). It aims to both safeguard and sustain construction skills, whilst simultaneously contributing to the conservation of physical historic fabric (Historic England, 2024a).

Set within the projected ‘skills crisis’ (Brennan et al., 2024b, p. 3), the programme makes an important connection between the safeguarding and practice of heritage-related skills, and the conservation and maintenance of traditional buildings. In short – it makes explicit how the safeguarding of intangible skills supports the conservation of physical fabric. Thus, it addresses and makes visible two intersecting forms of Heritage at Risk that are reliant upon one another – the tangible and the intangible. Whilst the programme is primarily devised to address the gaps and shortages in heritage-focused skills, other opportunities for impact include its ability to support social mobility in the heritage skills sector (Harlow Consulting, 2022, p. 25).

All activities are supported by construction colleges, heritage construction host firms, as well as other relevant supervisors/educators (Historic England, 2024a, 2024f). An annual Summer School has taken place since 2022, offering trainees the opportunity to work on live conservation projects at Heritage At Risk sites across the North of England (Figure 27), where they gain additional experience with various training opportunities such as specialist crafts (Harlow Consulting, 2022, p. 24).

Training activities at the Spring School were more than just demonstrations which the trainees were expected to watch; rather, they actively involved the trainees in conservation techniques and encouraged them to use practical skills. This hands-on, learn-by-doing approach was, in the view of stakeholders, highly effective in securing trainee engagement.
(Harlow Consulting, 2022, p. 24)

The 2024 Summer School was located at the Church of St. John the Evangelist, a Grade II listed decorated Gothic church in Lancaster, Lancashire (Historic England, 1978). Activities were tied into a 4-week programme with seventeen trainees involved in the HBSP across all three of its tiers, resulting in mixed groups (or ‘gangs’) of trainees (Historic England, 2024d, pp. 1–2).



Figure 27 – Historic England's Heritage Build Skills Programme Interactive Map
 Listed building sites across the North of England where the apprentices and trainees have worked
 Historic England © All Rights Reserved

A total of sixteen trainee 'outcomes' are noted as part of the Summer School 'Learning Objectives', of which the following are especially relevant to this research (Historic England, 2024d, p. 6):

- "...historic buildings are a finite resource that are **valued by different people for different reasons**" (Outcome 1 / Outcome 2).
- "Delegates will remember that when an old building is conserved, repaired or restored, it is good practice to **try to conserve as much significance as possible**" (Outcome 5).
- "...particular **skills and materials are required to conserve their significance**" (Outcome 6 / Outcome 7).

These stated Outcomes highlight a key link between the concept of 'significance' – which is "the sum of the cultural and natural heritage values of a place..." (Historic England, 2008, p. 72) and the skills involved in physical change to designated heritage assets. To build on this, the 'values' of a place are further defined as "[a]n aspect of worth or importance, **here attached by people to qualities of a place**" (Historic England, 2008, p. 72 bold added). It is therefore possible to deduce that the Summer School is attempting to strengthen connections across three key aspects of heritage: 1) skill; 2) meaning (values/ significance); and 3) physical fabric (part of 'place') (Figure 28).

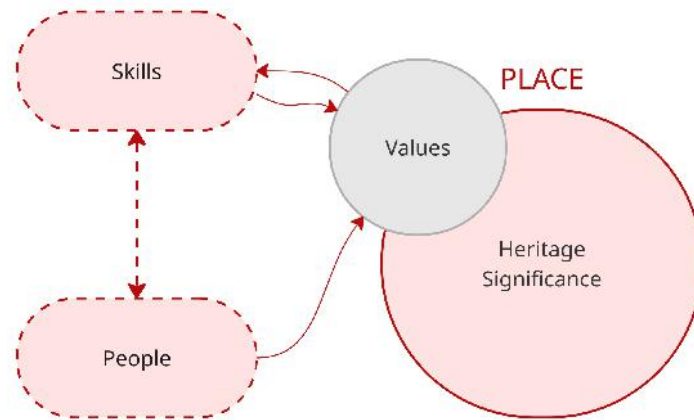


Figure 28 – People, skills, and values

Skills support the conservation of significance, which comprises the meanings people attach to places

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Interface between tangible and intangible

The link between physical heritage assets and traditional skills is strong and reciprocal, with skills and practices literally shaping and culturally charging physical heritage assets. Heritage practitioners often consider craft skills as part of the ICH related to physical assets because of the relationship between practical work, muscle memory and thought, as well as the connection between particular skills and their socio-political histories (Djabarouti, 2020).

The intangible knowledges, know-how, and skills related to the historic environment can also inform how and why those buildings are physically conserved or transformed for new uses (Squassina, 2022, p. 747). The perceived ‘authenticity’ of traditional skills also has an impact on the authenticity of built heritage, with the quality of these skills informing the quality of care afforded to the historic building stock (Hassard, 2009, p. 278).

The ultimate goal of the HBSP and their partnering host firms is the intergenerational transmission of cultural skills that themselves support the intergenerational transmission of pre-1919 historic buildings. This is a fundamental interface between tangible and intangible on this programme that works towards a holistic transmission of cultural heritage in specific places (Figure 29).

During the 2024 Summer School at the church, participants were taught traditional skills ‘on site’ at the venue from skills experts and were then given the opportunity to put this learning to use on the conservation and restoration of the church itself (Figure 30). These skills varied from maintenance works to preparation for stonework repair, carpentry, as well as other workshops held off site (Historic England, 2024e).

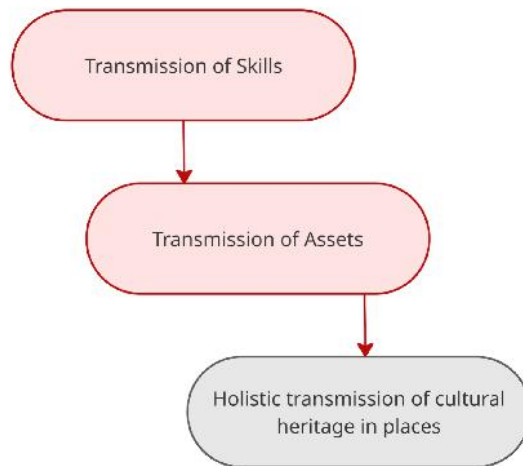


Figure 29 – Transmission of skills
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Figure 30 – Participants learning and doing on site
 Participants conducting ceiling joist repairs to the church where their Summer School is hosted
 Historic England © All Rights Reserved

Trainees had positive feelings towards the interdisciplinary nature of the school and how this interfaced with the experience of learning practical skills on site.

“I think what also worked well is that people from all different disciplines were involved at the Summer School, it was very much about us working on the building as a whole. I also loved how there were lots of practical sessions. I came away understanding how historic buildings were built, I understand how all the different aspects and materials goes together. Trainee Feedback.”
(Harlow Consulting, 2023, p. 18)

The on-site learning of skills reflected how skills are often in a constant state of evolution in response to the conditions within which they are performed – whether that be related to physical site conditions or the involvement of various trades or desk-based professions. It highlights the need for interdisciplinary approaches, bridging the gaps between tradespeople, desk-based practitioners, and educators.

The programme’s approach towards integrating multiple disciplines during workshops and training sessions can be framed as a method for creating synergies between the physical repair of materials and the intangible knowledge behind their use. Furthermore, by situating trainees within live conservation projects, they are provided with a dynamic context which emphasises how heritage work is a living, evolving process where both tangible materials (like stone and timber) and intangible skills (repair techniques and cultural narratives) are actively engaged (Norton, 2022).

It is also important to highlight how the experiences and benefits of the HBSP for trainees goes beyond the knowledges and embodied experiences of hands-on heritage building skills. Evaluation Reports for the programme highlight how the course impacts trainees and host organisations by fostering personal and professional growth which extends into broader areas of wellbeing, engagement, and societal impact, including:

- Creating opportunities for trainees to develop an interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary building skills support network (Harlow Consulting, 2023, p. 19, 2024a, p. 17,21)
- Supporting trainee mental health and wellbeing (Harlow Consulting, 2022, p. 27, 2023, p. 18)
- Inspiring trainees and cultivating their confidence (Harlow Consulting, 2023, p. 20, 2024a, p. 21,32)
- Supporting social mobility for young people (Harlow Consulting, 2022, p. 25, 2023, p. 22)
- Giving trainees experience in co-design of training programmes with host organisations (Harlow Consulting, 2022, p. 27)
- Encouraging trainee understanding of the connection between heritage skills and the value of historic buildings to local people (Harlow Consulting, 2024a, p. 14)

The heritage skills organisations involved also highlight the importance of cultivating a genuine enthusiasm and passion for their craft among trainees, recognising it as a key factor in sustaining these trades over generations (Harlow Consulting, 2024b, p. 6).

The role of materials plays a central and thought-provoking role on the HBSP, serving as a conduit for connecting the tangible and intangible aspects of heritage conservation together. Within the staff briefing for the 2024 Summer School (Historic England, 2024d, pp. 24–41), the outcomes highlight how it is the combination of **skills and materials** that work in tandem to conserve the *significance* of historic sites (a theoretical dimension) whilst also maintaining their functional performance (a practical dimension). This duality emphasises the critical interplay between materiality and skill, where the physical properties of materials are inseparable from the cultural and embodied knowledges required to work with them and which subsequently give them their cultural dimension.

The Summer School emphasises embodied cognition – learning through doing – by providing trainees with immersive, hands-on experiences with traditional materials. These activities go beyond technical application, encouraging deeper engagement with the cultural and historical significance of the materials. For example, during the 2024 Summer School, trainees explored lime mortar, a key material in pre-20th century building construction. They learned practical skills of mixing and application as well as gaining insight into its historical context, advantages, limitations, and compatibility with historic structures (Figure 31).



Figure 31 – Trainees learning how to work with hot-mixed lime mortars
Historic England © All Rights Reserved

This dual focus of blending technical precision with cultural insight highlights how materials themselves become vehicles for the transmission of ICH. One trainee reflected on this experience:

“I have shared ways of doing things that I learnt at the Summer School with colleagues. At Summer School we used hot-mixed lime mortars and learnt how to mix these with the pros/cons of using it. In my current role, we have been considering the use of hot lime and I have been able to put forward my opinions and experiences with it. Trainee feedback.”
(Harlow Consulting, 2024a, p. 32)

The programme also highlights how materials in and of themselves can act as dynamic participants in the heritage process, carrying within them and being a representation of the stories of their creation, use, and maintenance. For example, a discussion with trainees on mason’s marks – distinctive imprints left by individual craftsmen – captures the individuality and cultural lineage of those who physically shaped the material. This illustrates how the tangible fabric of a building becomes a record of intangible cultural practices, linking past traditions with contemporary conservation efforts.

This connection between materials and cultural memory aligns with the broader understanding of ICH as a living process, where traditional knowledge and skills are continuously adapted to modern contexts. This is reinforced on the HBSP through situating its training within live conservation projects, which ensures trainees experience the complexity of working with materials in real-world scenarios, negotiating the needs of stakeholders, the building fabric, and conservation principles. The exposure to transdisciplinary thinking, practical skills, and a need to navigate on-site demands of heritage work contributes towards trainees achieving an appropriate balance across the theory/practice, tangible/intangible and people/places binaries that situate their understanding of skills (also see Wells, 2017, p. 38).

The HBSP highlights the vital role of materials as both practical resources and carriers of cultural memory. Whilst traditional materials like lime mortar are historically appropriate, they are also environmentally sustainable, aligning with contemporary low-energy conservation techniques. By engaging with these materials, trainees develop an understanding of their ecological and cultural significance, appreciating how their work impacts both heritage conservation and society at large.

The dual focus on tradition and innovation connects past practices with future needs, ensuring heritage conservation remains relevant and adaptable. When working with these materials on site, trainees are placed within a lineage of embodied skills and traditions, reframing heritage conservation as more than just the conservation of physical structures. It is equally about safeguarding the intangible practices that sustain them. The priority of safeguarding these skills is also an explicit priority for the host firms and a positive aspect of the experience for trainees, which demonstrates how the HBSP supports more than just the physical conservation and retrofit of historic buildings:

“More importantly it’s about passing the skills and the knowledge down because that’s the biggest problem in our, and every specialist trade. . . we want to pass knowledge on.

Host firm feedback.”

(Harlow Consulting, 2023, p. 18)

“These skills traditionally are passed down through generations, and this programme has enabled me to learn these skills and get into the profession.

Trainee feedback.”

(Harlow Consulting, 2023, p. 18)

By treating materials as dynamic participants in conservation, the HBSP shows how it is possible to activate, transmit, and adapt cultural knowledge to modern contexts. In doing so, the programme nurtures an intergenerational approach to heritage where skills and materials are of equal priority within the process of passing heritage on.

Through this approach, the HBSP redefines specific material knowledge as a critical interface between tangible and intangible heritage. They are no longer static assets but active agents of cultural transmission, essential for revitalising the processes that give heritage its meaning.

This perspective challenges traditional conservation practices by placing equal importance on the people and skills behind material work. By integrating the conservation of buildings with the revitalisation of the cultural processes that sustain them, the programme ensures that heritage remains both resilient and relevant in an ever-changing world, a sentiment which can extend into finding new uses for historic buildings as well.

Strategies and outcomes

This section explores the specific approaches and strategies implemented throughout the HBSP, detailing how they contribute to the safeguarding of tangible and intangible heritage.

The summary points below highlight how the programme integrates skill development, material conservation, and sustainability to address contemporary heritage challenges. These points reflect the unique methodologies employed and their direct impact on heritage practices, professional training, and the broader conservation sector:

- **Context-based learning:** the HBSP situates skills training within live heritage environments, immersing trainees in a holistic understanding of tangible and intangible heritage at ‘real-world’ sites. This context-based approach fosters deeper engagement, allowing trainees to internalise the relationship between the historic fabric of a site and the cultural practices it represents. By embedding learning within active heritage projects, trainees develop both technical skills and a more profound appreciation of the unique constraints, narratives and traditions tied to these places.

- **Embodied learning through hands-on engagement:** a cornerstone of the HBSP is its focus on embodied learning – knowledge gained through physical interaction and practice. Trainees have an immersive experience with traditional materials and methods which connects them to the historical and cultural significance of materials whilst fostering practical expertise. By using hands and bodies within active heritage contexts, trainees develop understandings of how materials and skills interact to sustain the physical and cultural integrity of historic sites.
- **Materials as cultural conduits:** traditional materials are not viewed purely as physical resources, they are acknowledged as vessels of material memory – carrying the stories of their origins, usage, and evolution over time. This reinforces the idea that materials are more than historic or utilitarian. They have symbolic capacity and are dynamic participants in conservation, highlighting the dual role of materials as tools for technical conservation and mediums for cultural transmission.
- **Collaboration as a catalyst for skill development:** by fostering partnerships between host firms, craftspeople, heritage professionals, and trainees, the HBSP creates a collaborative interdisciplinary environment that bridges expertise and perspectives. This exchange of knowledge supports the intergenerational transmission of skills, whilst also demonstrating the importance of collective effort in the conservation of historic buildings and the cultural practices tied to them.

Transferrable insights

The lessons learnt from the HBSP provide valuable insights into how the relationship between tangible and intangible heritage can inform conservation practices, education, and design processes. These lessons extend beyond the specifics of the programme, offering transferable approaches that demonstrate how skills, materials, and embodied learning experiences can be applied to diverse heritage contexts.

- **Embodied learning as a tool for deeper understanding of heritage:** the HBSP demonstrates that hands-on, embodied engagement can be used beyond the development of technical skills to foster a more insightful appreciation of heritage processes and relationships. This approach could be applied to contexts beyond skills training to give practitioners and public the opportunity to gain a deeper understanding of complex systems, perspectives, or collaborative dynamics through active, experiential involvement in activities that support ICH.
- **Materials as cultural mediators and ‘active participants’:** the HBSP repositions materials as more than physical resources, highlighting their role in carrying cultural narratives and facilitating connections between people with diverse perspectives. This insight suggests that materials could mediate relationships in other heritage contexts, serving as tools for dialogue, engagement, or collaboration across social, professional, or cultural divides.

- **Context-based learning for grounded and impactful projects:** by situating heritage training and activities within the specific physical and social context of live conservation sites, the HBSP highlights the value of grounding projects in their specific places/environments. This approach supports processes to be more responsive to local needs, histories, and stakeholders, offering a transferable framework for developing projects that actively engage with both tangible (environment) and intangible (people) aspects of place.
- **Leveraging heritage projects for social and individual wellbeing:** the project shows the potential for built heritage projects to actively go beyond physical conservation by addressing broader societal goals such as confidence-building, mental wellbeing, and social mobility. By designing projects with these outcomes in mind, physical heritage can be used to drive personal growth and community resilience, fostering a stronger sense of connection and purpose within specific places.

Case study: Kirkham Heritage Health and Wellbeing Programme

Background

In recent years, heritage conservation has increasingly intersected with public health and wellbeing discourses, with research demonstrating that historic environments contribute positively to mental health, community identity, and social cohesion (Historic England, 2024b, p. 1,5; Taçon & Baker, 2019). In this emerging field, the relationship between heritage and wellbeing has moved from the margins of academic discourse into the mainstream (Taçon & Baker, 2019). It is now embedded in heritage policy and practice-based research, where wellbeing is recognised as a key social and economic metric for understanding life satisfaction (Colwill & Leeson, 2025, p. 24; Monckton, 2022, p. 239).

The National Academy for Social Prescribing (NASP) highlight how heritage activities can foster belonging and ownership, offering practical and emotional means of supporting wellbeing (National Academy for Social Prescribing, 2025c). This includes the relationship between social prescribing and intangible heritage, with NASP making clear reference to the value of stories, storytelling, local history, memory, participation, and person-centred approaches (see National Academy for Social Prescribing, 2025c, 2025a, 2025b).

Governments are also moving beyond purely economic indicators to measure societal wellbeing and seeking more holistic frameworks that include subjective and collective experiences (Lawler & Tissot, 2021, p. 249; Sayer, 2024, p. 15; Shoesmith et al., 2025, p. 2). This shift has opened up a new relevance for heritage – particularly intangible heritage – as a contributor to health, belonging, and social connection. In the UK, there is growing momentum behind connecting wellbeing with heritage practice that is supported by a broader rethinking of what heritage can do for people. Rather than being viewed as a collection of assets, heritage is now also being framed as a distributed and diverse landscape of voices, narratives, and cultural practices (Lawler & Tissot, 2021, p. 248). Intangible practices – ranging from rare ceremonial events to everyday routines such as bell ringing (Figure 32) – can animate the historic environment through human (social) and non-human (environmental) interactions that support the formation of healthier, more resilient communities (Djabarouti, 2024b, p. 457; Historic England, 2024b, p. 6).

Articulating these interconnections helps strengthen the evidence base for the societal value of heritage and the shift towards more dynamic understandings of what heritage is (Figure 33). It also supports the case for directing public resources towards the care, conservation, and continuity of the historic environment – not simply as a cultural asset, but as an active contributor to public good (Fujiwara et al., 2014; Monckton & Gradinarova, 2025; Sayer, 2024, p. 169).



Figure 32 – Bell ringing in the tower at Stoke Minster
 © Natalie Willatt. Source: Historic England Archive

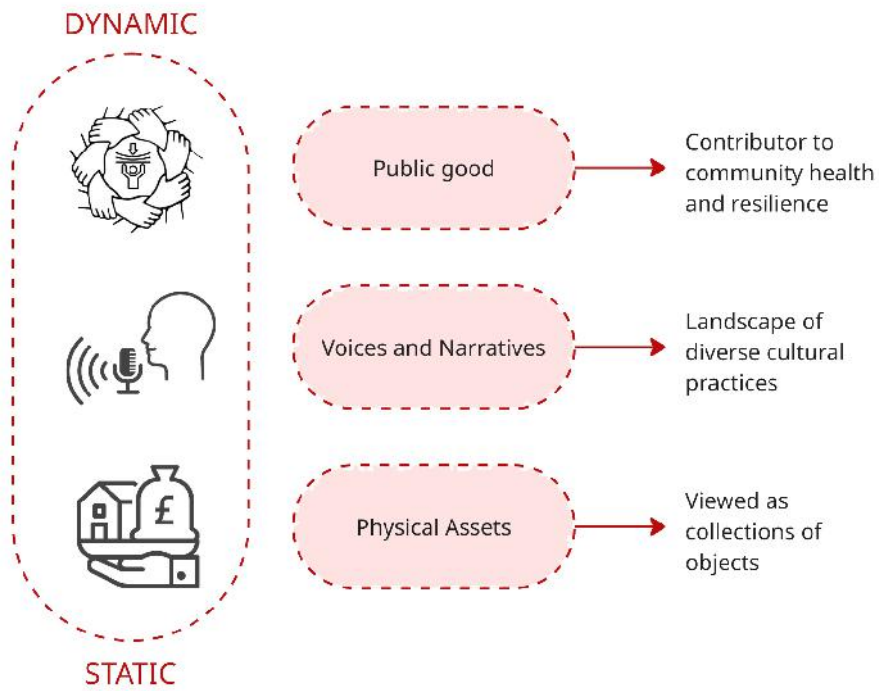


Figure 33 – Heritage shift from static to dynamic societal contributor
 Author original image © All Rights Reserved

HE's current Wellbeing and Heritage Strategy 2022-25 outlines how engagement with historic places can address issues across four key priority areas outlined within the strategy (Historic England, 2022a):

- 1.Young people
- 2.Ageing
- 3.Loneliness
- 4.Mental health

Along with helping to communicate the value of heritage to society, the strategy was also devised to improve HE's internal programme delivery as well (Historic England, 2022c) (Figure 34).

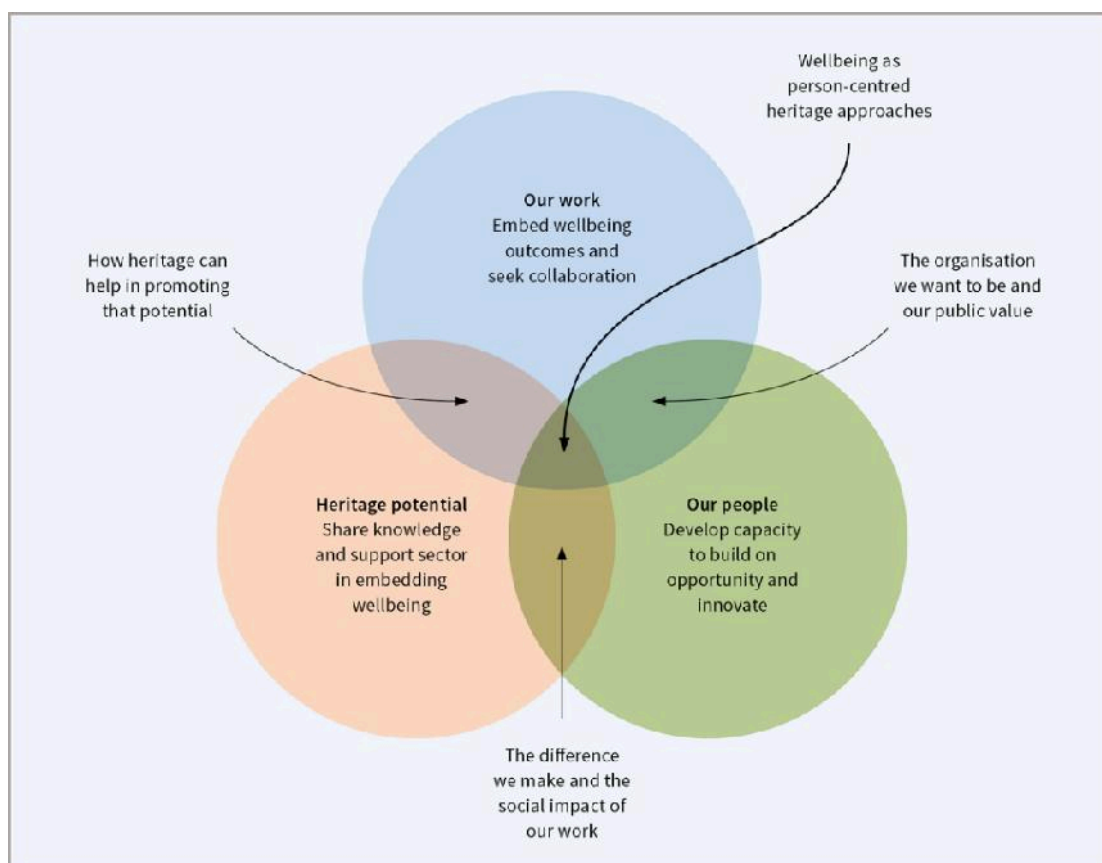


Figure 34 – Historic England's Wellbeing and Heritage Strategy
Extract from Historic England's Research Magazine, Issue 20 (2022)
Historic England © All Rights Reserved

Three key questions underpin their strategy: what difference can we make? What can our people do? What can the heritage sector do? (see Historic England, 2022e, p. 8).

Six key interrelating areas provide a framework for these priority areas (see Monckton, 2022, pp. 242–245):

1. Heritage as process (volunteering)
2. Heritage as participation (visiting)
3. Heritage as mechanism (sharing)
4. Heritage as healing (therapy)
5. Heritage as place (belonging)
6. Heritage as environment (experiencing)

A key aspect of this strategy is how it conceptualises wellbeing as both a process (immaterial) and a product (material) – hence why the priority areas are ultimately about getting people actively engaged with their environment and society (i.e. volunteering, visiting, sharing, therapy, belonging, experiencing) (Monckton, 2022, p. 249).

Running in tandem with this growing emphasis on wellbeing has been HE’s focus on high streets. Their High Streets Heritage Action Zones programme (HSHAZ) was a significant £103 million investment in rejuvenating historic high streets across a four-year delivery programme between 2020-2024 (Historic England, 2024c, 2025a). Traditionally centres of commerce, civic life, and social interaction, historic high streets have been impacted by long-term economic decline, shifts in consumer behaviour, and social disengagement (Ball et al., 2021; Historic England, 2025a, p. 7). Resultingly, many historic town centres face the challenge of underutilisation, vacancy, and disrepair.

Critically, when this issue is considered through the contemporary lens of heritage as a contributor to individual and community wellbeing, the decline of historic high streets can be understood as a social and psychological issue rather than just an economic or aesthetic one – impacting local identity, sense of belonging, civic pride, mental health, and sense of purpose (Historic England, 2025a, pp. 17, 46, 54). Responding to this, a series of innovative projects were commissioned under each of HE’s four strategy priority areas. This case study focuses in on a specific case within HE’s ‘mental health’ priority area.

Scope and relevance

HE have been working at the interface of historic high streets and wellbeing for over half a decade as part of their overarching goal to identify wellbeing opportunities in priority places – one of these being within the context of their HSHAZ Programme (see Historic England, 2020f). Kirkham, a historic market town in Lancashire, was selected as a HSHAZ pilot project and a programme called Kirkham Heritage Health and Wellbeing was commissioned in 2022 with Fylde Council to explore what a programme to improve local health and wellbeing using community assets might look like (Williamson & Cyhlarova, 2022, p. 5). This social

prescribing programme operated over three years (2021-2024), with the primary purpose of improving personal and community wellness by tackling social isolation through activities rooted in local heritage (Williamson & Cyhlarova, 2024, p. 9). It was organised around four thematic areas that connected Kirkham’s cultural history with contemporary health needs: 1) textile heritage and sustainability; 2) personal narratives and collective memory; 3) nutrition and healthy living practices; and 4) traditional crafts and skills development (Williamson & Cyhlarova, 2022, p. 6). This comprehensive approach encompassed regular participant groups, community celebrations, artistic commissions, and cross-sector collaborations, creating an integrated model that connected residents with their local heritage whilst tackling modern health and social challenges (Williamson & Cyhlarova, 2024, p. 10) (Figure 35).

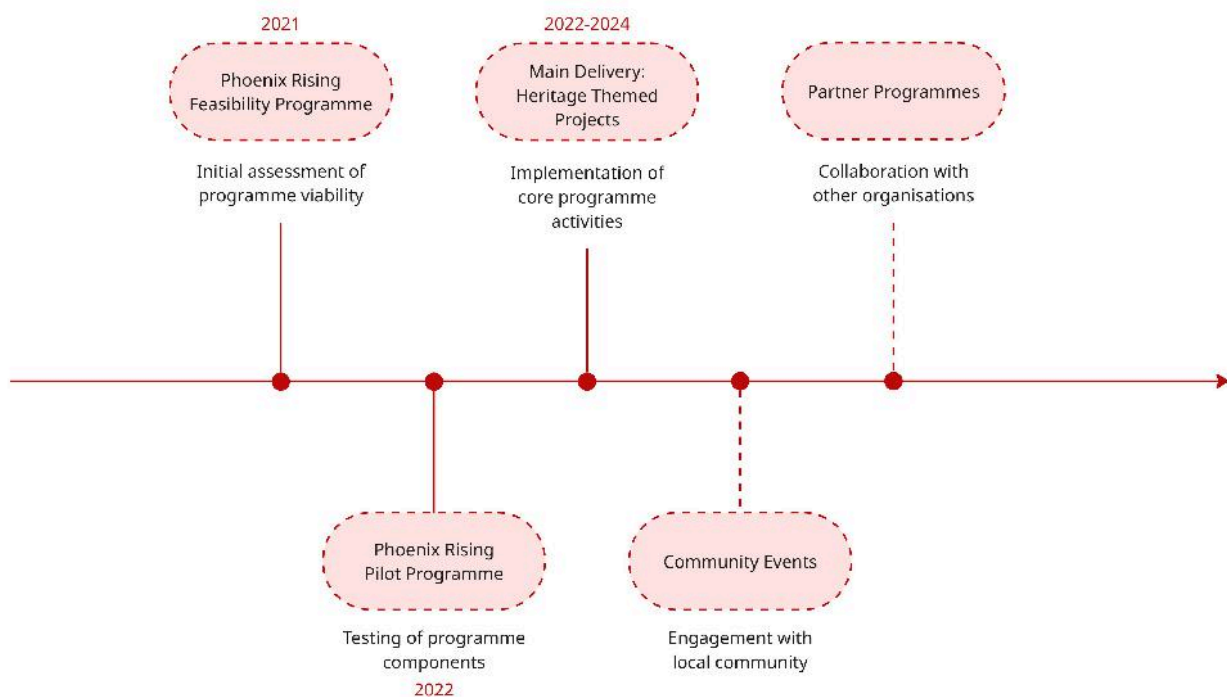


Figure 35 – Kirkham Heritage Health and Wellbeing Programme timeline overview
 Author original image © All Rights Reserved

The programme’s feasibility studies were implemented through Phoenix Rising, a regional creative organisation that employed freelance practitioners and strategic advisors, extending their existing Thriving Communities project across the Northwest region (Helen Shearn Associates, 2021a, p. 20; Williamson & Cyhlarova, 2024, p. 4). As part of the Kirkham HSHAZ, the programme sought to support wellbeing and cohesion for the community of Kirkham through a range of activities set within a considered social prescribing programme (Historic England, 2022e, pp. 68–70). It was designed to have a positive impact on both the tangible and the intangible, with the socio-cultural recovery of the place and its physical regeneration being equally prioritised and considered as interconnected issues

(Historic England, 2025a, p. 41). Key objectives of the programme (as per Helen Shearn Associates, 2021a) were:

- Developing a consortium focused on heritage and wellbeing.
- Improving the health and wellbeing of local people using existing community assets.
- Prioritising those most in need of support through the programme.
- Engaging more local people in heritage.
- Contributing to the knowledge pool on social prescribing from a heritage perspective.

Drawing on evaluation reports by Williamson & Cyhlarova (2022, 2024), feasibility studies by Helen Shearn Associates (2021a, 2021b, 2021c), programme documentation from HE and Fylde Council, as well as online sources from Kirkham Futures and NASP, this case study explores how the initiatives related to Kirkham HSHAZ's focus on wellbeing has also had meaningful positive impact on ICH, which is unavoidably tied to heritage-led wellbeing strategies. By situating heritage within wellbeing and health policy frameworks, this case study seeks to highlight how HE is expanding its remit beyond traditional conservation models, which in turn advocates for ICH as both a core facet of the historic environment and a social determinant of the health and wellbeing of the country.

Literature review

Heritage, place, and wellbeing

Humans are inherently social, historically forming groups to foster connection, shared identity, and collective memory (Fagin, 2018; Richardson et al., 2025, p. 38). These social structures offer stability and continuity through the transmission of knowledge and culture, much of which is learned and reinforced through interactions with each other (Cortellesi et al., 2018, p. 425). The historic environment plays an important role in this process, unquestionably as the stage for cultural expression but also as a medium through which individuals orient themselves in time (Sektani et al., 2023, p. 53). Historic environments support wellbeing by providing familiar physical and spatial features – like buildings, streets, squares, and landmarks – that help people make sense of where they are and how a place has changed over time, which facilitates culturally shaped ways of seeing a clearer connection between past, present, and future (Sektani et al., 2023, p. 53,55). Heritage in this context supports both identity and a sense of being (Cortellesi et al., 2018). It also enables deeper forms of connectedness that extend beyond social relationships to include emotional bonds with place, memory, and the natural world – all of which are increasingly recognised as foundational to both individual wellbeing and wider ecological awareness (Richardson et al., 2025, pp. 38–39).

In recent years, the topic of wellbeing has gained traction within public and political discourse (Sayer, 2018). Sayer (2018) defines wellbeing as a combination of physical, social, and

psychological variables – a definition that aligns with the UK Government’s formal description of wellbeing as “a positive physical, social and mental state” (Department of Health, n.d., p. 13). Monckton (2022, p. 239) more memorably characterises wellbeing as a measure of “how we are doing”, capturing both hedonic (feeling good) and eudaimonic (realising potential) dimensions (Shoosmith et al., 2025, p. 2). Monckton and Watson (2022) further identify seven spatial scales at which wellbeing can manifest – from population-level down to individual and hyper-local contexts – offering a place-based framing for health systems and policy design. Improving wellbeing within a governmental context is complicated by its subjective and intangible nature, which resists quantification. However, six core factors have been identified that support the relationship between built heritage and wellbeing across these scales: 1) emotional connectedness; 2) social connectedness; 3) knowledge gain; 4) physical state; 5) cultural accessibility; and 6) personal preferences or satisfaction (Sektani et al., 2023, p. 57) (Figure 36).

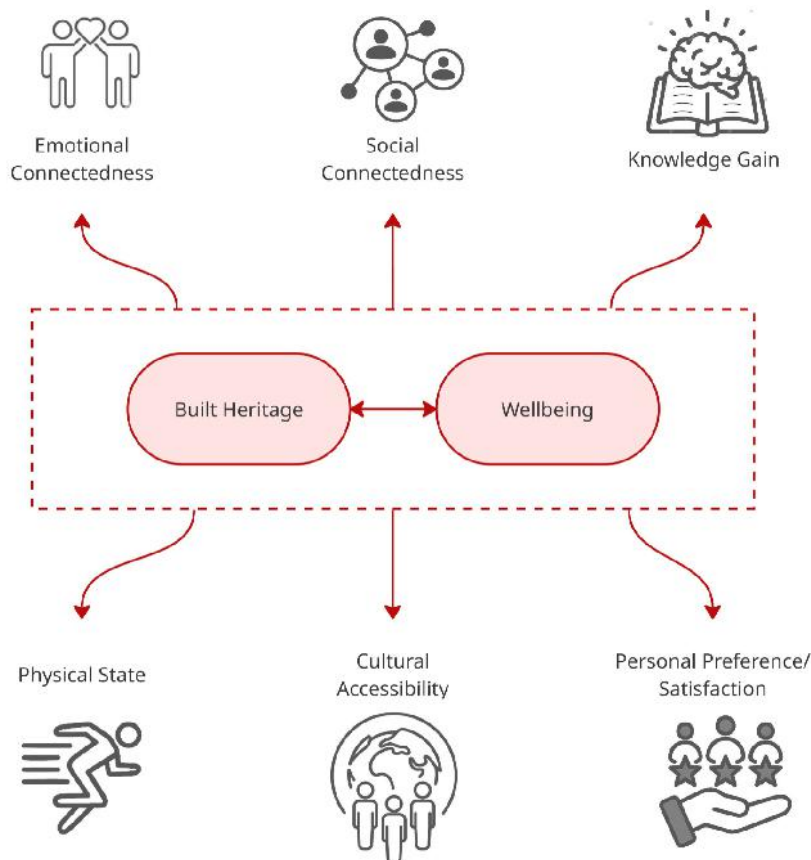


Figure 36 – Factors influencing wellbeing in heritage contexts
 After Sektani et al. (2023) and Monckton and Watson (2022)
 Author original image © All Rights Reserved

Participation, policy, and place-based practice

Running in parallel with the growing interest in wellbeing strategies for the historic environment is a broader shift in how heritage is understood and valued specifically in the UK. There is incremental movement away from viewing heritage purely as physical assets or singular narratives of the past, and towards more plural and dynamic interpretations.

These new framings acknowledge heritage as an active expression that is shaped by memory, identity, emotion, and participation – elements that can be in tension or contested (Djabarouti, 2024a). From a wellbeing perspective, this places new demands on the historic environment, requiring it to support diverse narratives and lived experiences (Mock, 2018, p. 372). It also expands the scope of what constitutes physical heritage, drawing attention to non-designated cultural spaces such as local high streets (Bowden et al., 2025, p. 2).

This reframing has significant implications for heritage practice. Sayer (2018, p. 389) argues that wellbeing-focused heritage projects must be participatory, context-specific, and inclusive, in order to maximise benefit. Monckton (2022, p. 241) likewise sees this as an opportunity for the heritage sector to play a more explicit role in tackling wellbeing inequalities. In line with this, the following six characteristics are noted as essential for successful wellbeing-oriented projects: 1) community-centred; 2) contextually specific; 3) demographically inclusive; 4) offer freedom of choice; 5) promote ownership; and 6) encourage physical activity (see Sayer, 2018).

The shift towards a more intangible, wellbeing-focused and participative heritage outlook in the UK has been further strengthened in policy through the ratification of the UNESCO 2003 Convention. DCMS' Consultation Outcome on this ratification process explicitly acknowledges the diversity of health and wellbeing practices within communities and commits to ensuring that living heritage promotes wellbeing for both practitioners and the wider public:

“We note that health care practices are diverse; communities, groups and individuals may have differing ideas of their own health and well-being needs. We will therefore include in the code of ethics that living heritage should promote positive health, well-being and safety for both the practitioners and others.”
(Department for Culture Media & Sport, 2025, p. 50).

This highlights the subjectivity of heritage and how its responsibility for promoting wellbeing would therefore require active participation and involvement of communities, as per the sentiment of the overarching convention (see UNESCO, 2003).

Whilst the material world (whether buildings, streetscapes, or landscapes) forms the basis of everyday heritage practices, the meanings attached to it are dynamic and socially produced (Mock, 2018, p. 372), and properties of materials can have a psychological contribution to cognitive, sensorial, and broader emotional responses (Gallou, 2022, p. 13). Equally, informed by shifts in health geography and spatial theory, space is also no longer viewed simply as a neutral backdrop to life, but as something active, emergent, and produced through lived relations. Rather than being a fixed container in which wellbeing occurs, space is now recognised as something that shapes (and is shaped by) how people feel, move, and interact with their surroundings (Andrews et al., 2022). Alterations to the historic built environment can therefore significantly impact the intangible qualities of heritage (such as memories, wellbeing, and belonging), highlighting the importance of

participatory approaches that understand place as relational, responsive, and co-produced (Djabarouti, 2024c). This consequently brings into focus issues of agency, representation, and power within heritage: who decides, who benefits, and whose stories are told (Monckton, 2022, p. 241). Monckton and Watson (2022) argue that wellbeing accordingly offers a timely and pragmatic lens through which to address these immediate social issues and needs.

Whilst academic literature is implicit and emergent concerning the connections between history, heritage and health (Orthel, 2022), it is the grey literature that is now explicit in connecting engagement with the historic environment to improved mental health, life satisfaction, and happiness. However, it also points to persistent inequalities in access (for example, see Department of Health, n.d.; Historic England, 2022a, 2022e, 2024b; Monckton & Watson, 2022). Macdonald, Caryl, and Mitchell (2024) describe these barriers as “socio-spatial inequalities” and argue for place-based heritage interventions that respond to patterns of deprivation. Such approaches are particularly relevant in ageing populations. For example, Bowden, Woolrych, and Kennedy (2025) highlight the value of “ageing-in-place”, where familiar environments support older adults through accessible heritage, social connection, and a sense of continuity (Figure 37). Another example is the TOY Programme which demonstrates the centrality of intergenerational interaction to wellbeing and identifies five goals that support health and cohesion across generations: building and sustaining relationships; enhancing social cohesion; recognising the roles of grandparents; facilitating the transfer of knowledge from older to younger people; and enriching learning processes for all ages (Cortellesi et al., 2018).

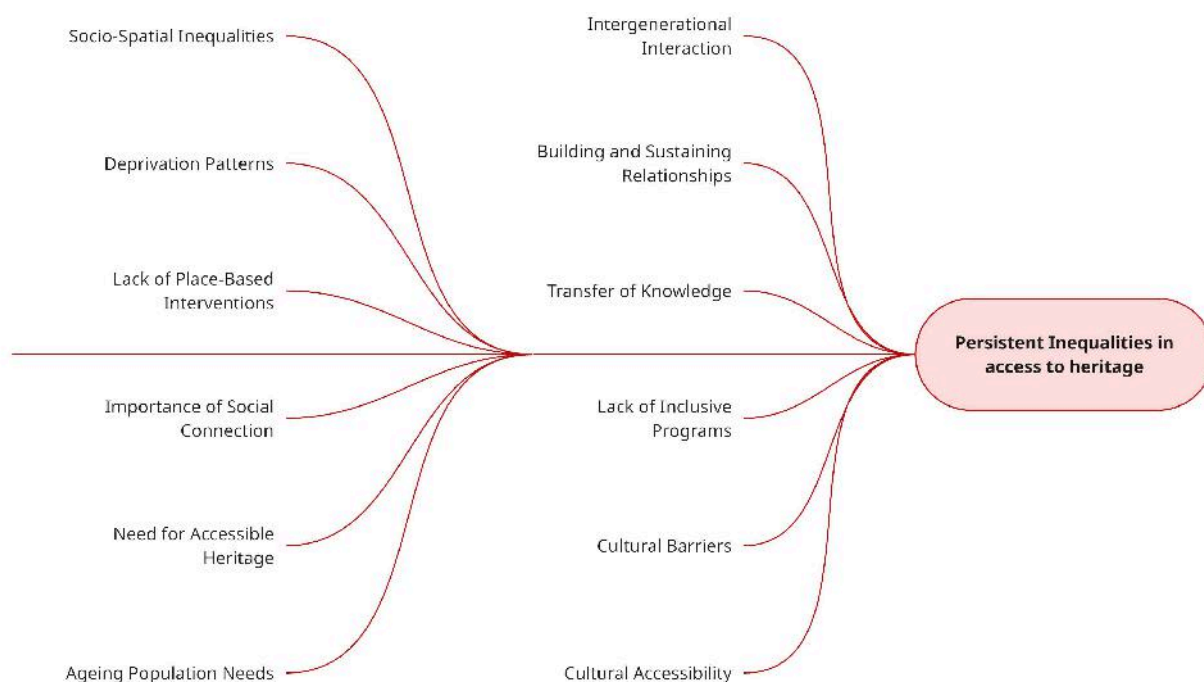


Figure 37 – Overcoming barriers to heritage and wellbeing
 After Macdonald, Caryl, and Mitchell (2024) and Bowden, Woolrych, and Kennedy (2025)
 Author original image © All Rights Reserved

Initiatives that encourage physical movement through historic places and champion embodied (non-digital) experiences in historic environments are seen as a key driver to achieve health and wellbeing benefits from the historic environment (Burlingame, 2022; Ryan & Hill, 2022). This is supported by recent research which shows how different qualities of space, such as its material textures, rhythms, sensory effects, and habitual patterns, can shape how people feel and behave in places (Andrews et al., 2022). Activities like walking, gardening, or even simply being present in a familiar environment can generate positive emotional and physical responses, reinforcing wellbeing through everyday spatial encounters. For example, Urban Foresight’s Greening the High Street initiative (2024) established growing spaces to support social prescribing. Creative activities are also noted as fundamental, especially when they take place outdoors or are embedded within local community infrastructure (Shoesmith et al., 2025, p. 2). More everyday experiences such as going to local pubs, sports centres, or other social spaces are further highlighted as contributors despite often having no official heritage recognition or formal historic merit (Bowden et al., 2025, p. 14). In short – better and more explicit “opportunity structures” are required to make full use of the historic environment in supporting mental health and wellbeing (Macdonald et al., 2023, p. 7).

ICH findings

The Kirkham Heritage, Health and Wellbeing Programme was developed as a core component alongside the £1.8 million HSHAZ physical regeneration works, which included building restoration, shopfront upgrades, public realm improvements and Market Square works (Williamson & Cyhlarova, 2024). Conceived not as an add-on but as a condition for the long-term success of the physical interventions, the programme demonstrated an integrated approach to understanding how cultural practices, wellbeing activities and local memory shape decisions about the built environment. Its ‘expected outcomes’ were deliberately framed around psycho-social improvements, confidence-building and reduced isolation through heritage-based activity in appropriate physical settings (see Helen Shearn Associates, 2021b, p. 4). The programme’s foundation lay in recognising that community wellbeing was inseparable from changes to the high street environment, prompting a holistic, people-centred model that linked the development of historic places with the social conditions needed to sustain them (Historic England, 2022b, 2022e, p. 72). This established a form of social prescribing that positioned heritage as central to wellbeing outcomes and, crucially, to physical regeneration (Helen Shearn Associates, 2021c; Williamson & Cyhlarova, 2024). The feasibility study and the resulting thematic framework (sustainable textiles; life stories and memories; healthy living and food; and heritage skills and craft) reinforced this approach by creating structured ways for local people to engage with both cultural traditions and historic buildings (Helen Shearn Associates, 2021a, p. 19).

The following sub-sections provide some practical examples of how cultural practices shaped the physical regeneration of the high street before moving to the wider ICH activities relating to memory, craft and wellbeing.

Cultural practices shaping physical regeneration

Across the programme, cultural practices influenced how physical space was designed, adapted and used. Rather than treating buildings and public spaces as passive containers for activity, the programme placed intangible heritage – such as collective memory, everyday practice and wellbeing priorities – at the centre of decisions about the conservation area. (Figure 38).

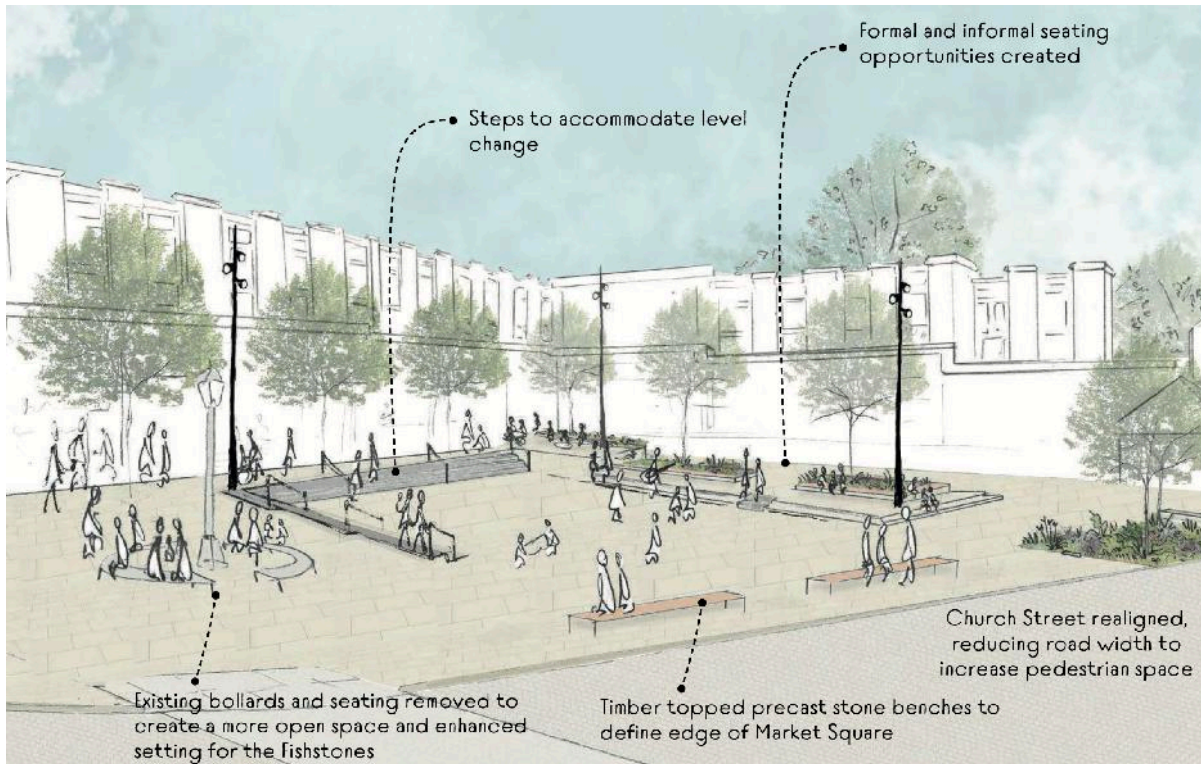


Figure 38 – Market Square proposed changes

Extract from Design, Access & Planning Statement (The Paul Hogarth Company, 2021)

Kirkham Town Council Planning Portal Public domain

Market Square exemplifies this approach through its transformation to accommodate heritage-based wellbeing activities. Cultural programme objectives explicitly required ‘meanwhile use’ space on the high street or in Market Square for exhibitions and final events. This requirement directly influenced the permanent closure of Market Square to parked vehicles and the creation of level surfaces designed to accommodate markets, community events, and social prescribing activities (Fylde Council, 2023). The public realm design prioritised versatility, enabling the space to support heritage-based wellbeing activities whilst maintaining the square's historic character (The Paul Hogarth Company, 2021, p. 7)

Through route-based activities such as heritage trails embedded within the ‘Healthy Living & Food’ theme, the project acknowledged how local environmental knowledge and food traditions represent forms of intangible heritage that can inform public realm design and conservation area management (Helen Shearn Associates, 2021a). A practical example is the development of the Kirkham Treasures heritage trail which connects people with Kirkham’s historic environment through interactive community-led installations and signage

that represent the memories, stories and histories of local people (Helen Shearn Associates, 2021a, p. 47) (Figure 39 and Figure 40).



Figure 39 – Kirkham's 'Talking Wall' as part of the 'Kirkham Treasures' initiative
Historic images brought to life using QR codes to access oral history recordings
Historic England © All Rights Reserved



Figure 40 – Kirkham Treasures floor graphic
Part of the initiative to promote Kirkham's Talking Wall and encourage movement through the town
Historic England © All Rights Reserved

Heritage-based activities required specific physical characteristics from venues to support wellbeing outcomes. The programme recognised that effective heritage spaces needed to facilitate social relationships and belonging through craft making, museum-based interventions, and community-based arts programmes that are linked to Kirkham's histories (Helen Shearn Associates, 2021b, p. 4). These cultural practices shaped venue requirements, demanding flexibility to accommodate multiple activity types. The programme's emphasis on encouraging people to interact in and around the high street influenced decisions about pedestrian space allocation and seating provision throughout the conservation area (Historic England, 2022b).

The programme's 'meanwhile use' strategy created direct connections between ICH and vacant buildings. Cultural activities specifically targeted empty high street units through temporary heritage-themed interventions, with vacant units identified as bases for artist programmes, community engagement and skills initiatives (Historic England, 2020d, p. 5, 2022b; Kirkham Futures, 2022). This approach demonstrated how ICH could activate underutilised spaces and frontages whilst supporting broader regeneration objectives through increased footfall and enhanced appreciation of undervalued areas (Historic England, n.d., p. 20). It is also worth noting how the four cultural heritage themes also created specific spatial requirements that directly informed physical heritage interventions. For example, sustainable textiles activities needed workshop spaces within heritage buildings for demonstrations and hands-on learning. Life stories and memories required venues and urban routes capable of hosting exhibitions whilst maintaining intimate settings for personal narrative sharing. Healthy living and food programmes needed kitchen facilities and dining areas within heritage contexts. Lastly, heritage skills and crafts demanded workshop spaces with appropriate ventilation and tool storage whilst respecting historic building constraints (also see Helen Shearn Associates, 2021b).

Heritage as community memory and identity

Running alongside these spatial interventions was a sustained focus on memory, identity and storytelling. The 'life stories and memories' theme specifically supports the intergenerational transmission of cultural knowledge through oral history projects, including Kirkham Lives and the Voices from Kirkham and Wesham events (Helen Shearn Associates, 2021a). This perspective was embedded into the wider Kirkham HSHAZ strategy from the outset, with the initial application noting that "it's not just about 'bricks and mortar', but about developing a programme that connects local people to their home-town" (Fylde Borough Council, 2019, p. 26). As a result, the programme adopted a "...holistic and people-centred approach..." that placed community wellbeing and inclusive placemaking at the heart of how the built environment was developed (Historic England, 2022e, p. 71).

Community memory-sharing activities within the programme emphasised the importance of engaging people with direct experience of historic sites (National Academy for Social Prescribing, 2025b). A practical example of this approach is the *Voices from Kirkham* oral history collection which captured individual memories and stories from residents, requiring

physical spaces through the town where people could build rapport and communicate with facilitators (Williamson & Cyhlarova, 2022, p. 29) (Figure 41).

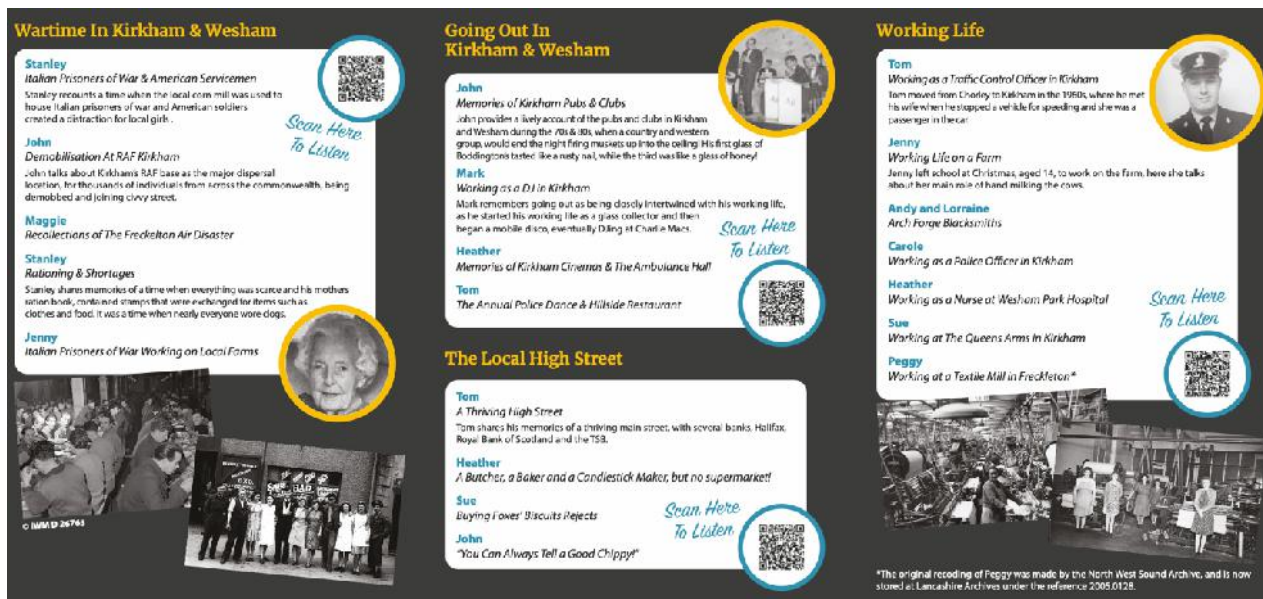


Figure 41 – Voices from Kirkham & Wesham
A collection of themed stories and memories including the high street
Kirkham Town Council Public domain

The programme’s oral history activities operated through venues like St Michael’s Church and Kirkham Library, where participants shared memories in informal settings that facilitated conversation and community building (Historic England, 2022d). This initiative formed part of the Going Out project, a community engagement programme that commissioned nostalgic events to recreate social experiences and (re)activate memories (Figure 42).

These initiatives recognise that individual memories and family histories are repositories of ICH that, when shared collectively, strengthen community bonds and can subsequently create evidence bases for conservation decision-making. As one participant reflected:

“When you know the history and the heritage of somewhere, then you connect with it more.”
(see Williamson & Cyhlarova, 2024, p. 30).

The programme’s emphasis on oral history training demonstrates how communities can become active custodians of their own ICH, with trained volunteers conducting interviews that were then lodged in Lancashire Archives, reinforcing Kirkham’s identity within the broader Lancashire community and creating potential sources for future heritage interpretation and statements of significance (Helen Shearn Associates, 2021a, p. 24).

GOING OUT
April – June 2022

A fantastic programme of free events, bringing back memories of nights out in Kirkham.

Big Nights Out
 Connect with friends and family and enjoy an intergenerational evening of entertainment, with food music and more. Fancy dress is optional.

All we want is for you to bring your photos of nights out in Kirkham, from any era, and some of your memories, we will make copies and return them.

60s & 70s
 Saturday 30th April, 7.30pm at Kirkham Community Centre

80s & 90s
 Saturday 21st May, 7.30pm at The Willows

To help manage numbers, free tickets are available through Eventbrite or from Serendipity House on Poulton Street.

Pop-Up Discos
 Join in the fun, while creating a play list of your favourite songs.

60s & 70s
 Saturday 23rd April, 11am-3pm at Kirkham Market Square

80s & 90s
 Saturday 14th May, 11am-3pm at Kirkham Market Square

Meet The 'Good Times Gal'
 Tuesday 26th April, 4-5.30pm at Book, Bean & Ice Cream
 Come along, enjoy a drink on us, and reminisce with Kirkham's 'Good Times Gal'. Don't forget to bring your photos and memories of nights out in Kirkham.

For further information visit
kirkhamtreasures.co.uk & kirkhamfutures.org
 or see [facebook.com/KirkhamTreasures](https://www.facebook.com/KirkhamTreasures)

Hi! KIRKHAM POSITIVE PLACEMAKERS Fylde Council Historic England

Photos by Mark Herrington

Figure 42 – Going Out project flyer

A series of nostalgia-focused events with an emphasis on social activities

Fylde Council Public domain

Traditional skills and craft knowledge

The project's 'sustainable textiles' theme demonstrates how traditional craft knowledge functions as ICH whilst directly supporting wellbeing and physical conservation. This approach aligns with a broader 'Heritage Skills Centre' model where traditional building techniques (e.g. stone masonry, brickwork, lime mortar, stained glass restoration, etc) are taught through live on-site training on historic building restoration projects (Historic England, n.d., p. 9).

Kirkham's historical identity as being known as 'the Cotton town' during Lancashire's Industrial Revolution provides the cultural foundation for contemporary heritage crafts activities and skills training programmes. For example, *the Kirkham's Golden Threads* project explored the town's heritage of flax production and manufacturing through

collaborative making and research led by a textile artist working with local women (Chappell Aspinwall, 2022). Local participants learned traditional processes along with specific technical vocabulary that was traditionally used. The project demonstrates how contemporary community engagement with traditional textile techniques creates new forms of ‘hands-on’ ICH that local people can engage with, whilst simultaneously embodying centuries of accumulated histories and textile practices (Figure 43). As one participant noted:

“I have really enjoyed sewing again and being part of a fantastic group of like-minded people. I look forward to continuing sewing with these ladies – new friends when this project comes to an end.”
 (Chappell Aspinwall, 2022)

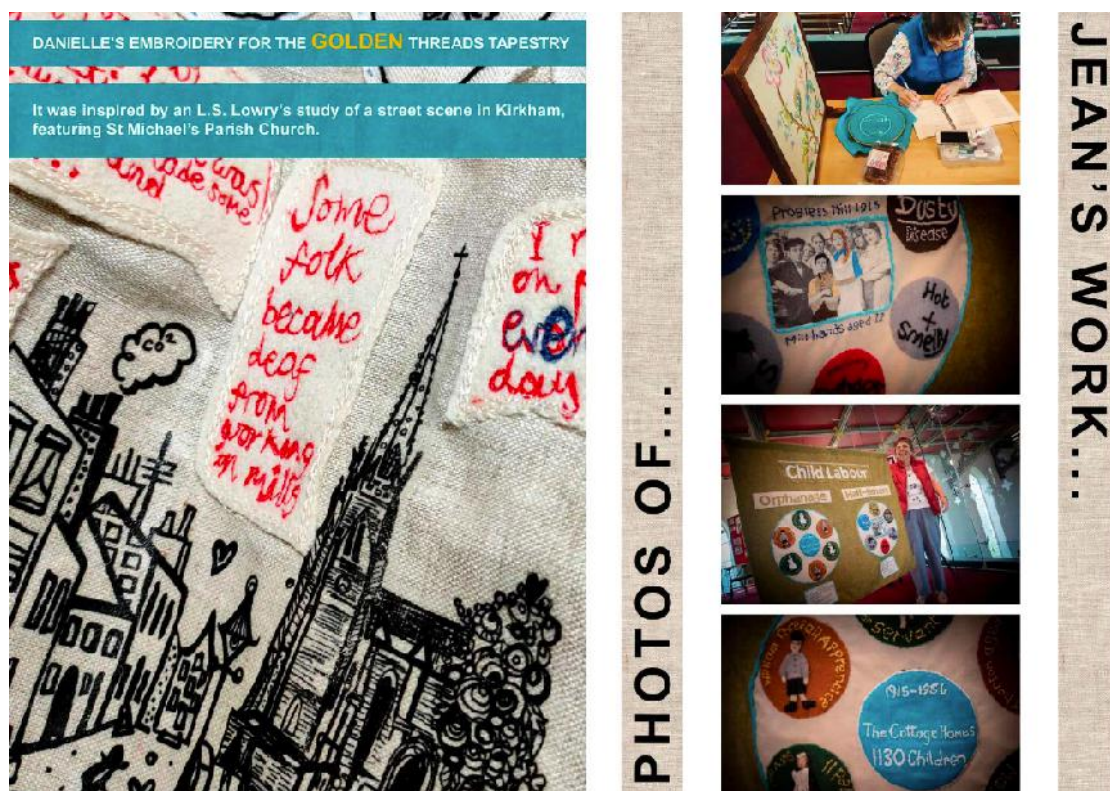


Figure 43 – Kirkham’s Golden Threads

Extract from project pamphlet showing the work of Jean, one of the local ladies engaged with the project
 Fylde Council Public domain

Craft and skill were explored further through a proposal to restore and adapt the Grade II listed Hillside building into a specialist regional Heritage and Eco Skills Centre (Kirkham Futures, 2022). The proposed restoration of the building was driven by its reuse as a local asset to provide an environment for heritage wellbeing activities, apprenticeships, and short courses (Historic England, 2021b, 2022b). The programme envisioned the building as an active repair project providing locally embedded learning opportunities where traditional craft skills could be transmitted within site-based contexts (Historic England, n.d., p. 11). Unfortunately, the flagship centre was not realised within the programme timeframe due to various constraints, but it nonetheless highlights an initiative which straddles tangible and

intangible heritage that was well received by a significant number of programme stakeholders.

Cultural practices as wellbeing mechanisms

Heritage-based activities played a direct role in enhancing wellbeing across the community, again illustrating the interconnected social and spatial nature of the HSHAZ programme. The programme explicitly frames heritage activities as mechanisms for improving both individual and community wellbeing whilst supporting physical regeneration objectives, drawing on the Royal Society for Public Health's 'Community Spirit' framework which defines community spirit as "the feelings of connection and belonging to a community and our ability to come together to improve wellbeing for everybody" (Helen Shearn Associates, 2021a, p. 8). A specific example is Phoenix Rising partnership's methodology, which combined various craft, movement, and outdoor activities that were mostly underpinned by local history and heritage. This included heritage walks, arts and crafts, gardening, cookery, and exercise (Williamson & Cyhlarova, 2022, p. 7). This multifaceted approach demonstrates how ICH practices – such as storytelling, craft-making, collective memory-sharing, and heritage walks – create opportunities for social connection, skill development, and place attachment that also directly represent the successes of physical regeneration work.

Evaluation findings show that participants reported increased confidence and were more likely to get involved in other community events, whilst the programme strengthened community connections and improved residents' knowledge and appreciation of their town's history, deepening their connection with place (Williamson & Cyhlarova, 2024, p. 5). The programme also catalysed new community activities and connections including new community groups such as the Men's Sheds initiative which is underpinned by "connection, conversation and creation" (Men's Sheds, 2025), and sustained social networks that extended beyond the formal programme such as the *Friends of Kirkham Library*, sewing and poetry groups, and other informal WhatsApp and coffee groups that were formed by participants who continued to meet independently (Williamson & Cyhlarova, 2022, p. 7, 2024, p. 5).

Challenges

The Kirkham programme encountered several challenges that illuminate the complexities of working at the intersection of tangible and intangible heritage, particularly when heritage becomes a vehicle for contemporary wellbeing interventions:

- **Tangible heritage infrastructure access barriers:** physical heritage venues often lacked accessibility for target demographics, with weekend venue unavailability constraining programming and mobility barriers preventing full engagement with historic buildings (The Paul Hogarth Company, 2021, p. 15; Williamson & Cyhlarova, 2022, p. 4). This highlights a more practical interface between physical and non-physical aspects of culture that can impact the embodied experience of a place.

- **Digital exclusion versus traditional heritage transmission:** online booking systems excluded older participants who possessed crucial ICH knowledge through lived memories and oral traditions, arguably disrupting natural cultural transmission processes essential for heritage-based wellbeing interventions (Williamson & Cyhlarova, 2022, pp. 13, 25, 2024, p. 49).
- **Local expertise deficit:** a lack of locally based practitioners meant facilitators were brought in from elsewhere, reducing continuity and hindering longer-term skill development (Williamson & Cyhlarova, 2024, p. 45). As a result, heritage knowledge was mediated through external practitioners without established community relationships or local memory. This reflected wider regional gaps in heritage capacity within the north-west, evidenced by reduced benefit-cost ratios and regional programme outcomes (see Historic England, 2025a, p. 17).
- **Intergenerational knowledge transmission barriers:** activity titles such as ‘walking’ or ‘gardening’ deterred those with mobility issues (Williamson & Cyhlarova, 2022, pp. 25–26). Daytime scheduling excluded younger working adults who could have supported intergenerational participation (Williamson & Cyhlarova, 2024, p. 50). This pattern aligns with wider evidence showing that young people’s heritage engagement increases when adults participate or encourage involvement, yet these access barriers constrained that dynamic (The Heritage Alliance, 2020, p. 76).
- **Mediating between cultural transmission and therapeutic accessibility:** ICH required careful adoption to enhance rather than constrain wellbeing outcomes, with some heritage-based activities sometimes meeting resistance. Clog dancing, for example, initially felt out of place to participants expecting an exercise class (Williamson & Cyhlarova, 2024, pp. 46–47). Facilitators had to introduce heritage elements gradually and collaboratively to maintain comfort and engagement.
- **Integrating individual therapeutic needs with collective heritage practices:** the open-access model meant facilitators were unsure of participants’ abilities and motivations each week (Williamson & Cyhlarova, 2022, p. 26). Although wellbeing outcomes improved, the programme had to balance personal goals with heritage’s inherently communal nature (Historic England, 2022a, p. 4; Williamson & Cyhlarova, 2024, p. 22).

Strategies and outcomes

The programme highlights five outcomes for understanding how tangible and intangible heritage interact in practice. In Kirkham, heritage acted mainly as a way to structure cultural activity and strengthen belonging, with specific buildings serving as helpful settings rather than the core focus:

- **ICH shaping physical space requirements:** the programme shows how intangible practices can drive physical interventions. Market Square’s redesign and vehicle closure were shaped by heritage-focused wellbeing aims (Fylde Council, 2023). The ‘meanwhile use’ of vacant units further demonstrates how cultural activity can activate underused spaces and support regeneration. This challenges conservation approaches that prioritise fabric alone, emphasising instead how participation, belonging and place-based practices can inform tangible interventions through relational and co-produced understandings of heritage.
- **Material and spatial conditions for cultural participation:** ICH activities depended on accessible, comfortable and recognisable settings. Effective participation required suitable rooms, lighting, ventilation and layouts, yet their significance often stemmed from how they supported social ease, routine, and intergenerational exchange rather than from their heritage character. Barriers in heritage venues limited involvement – particularly among older adults who hold key knowledge – highlighting the importance of familiar, age-friendly environments (Bowden et al., 2025; Helen Shearn Associates, 2021b, p. 4).
- **Community memory as conservation evidence base:** the programme positions oral histories, local narratives and heritage walks as legitimate sources of heritage evidence. These practices generated material for future decision-making rooted in the town’s wider identity rather than in specific buildings. This reflects how socially produced meanings are embedded across the whole townscape and positions community knowledge alongside professional expertise (Mock, 2018).
- **Physical movement as embodied cultural heritage transmission:** heritage trails, walking routes, and movement-based activities enabled cultural learning through direct engagement with the historic town. Initiatives such as Phoenix Rising’s mindful walking and the Kirkham Treasures trail strengthened wellbeing and place-based connection by encouraging people to experience streets, landmarks and familiar settings (Williamson & Cyhlarova, 2024, p. 10). This aligns with wider evidence on embodied interaction with historic environments

Transferrable insights

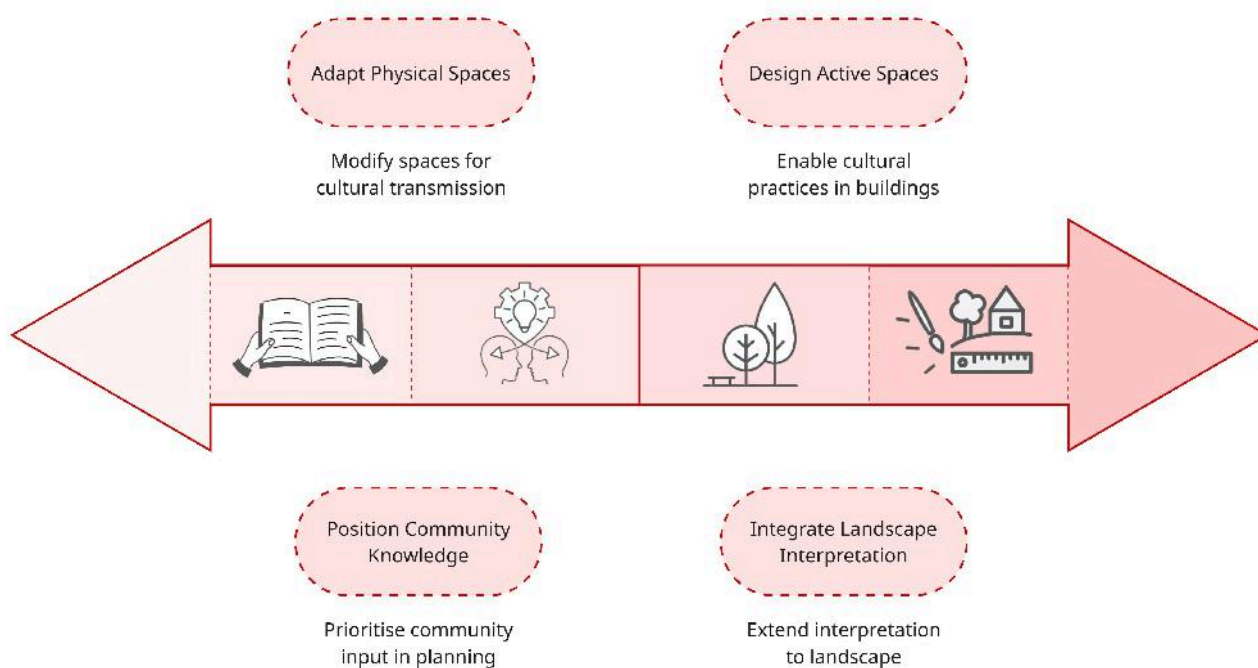


Figure 44 – Conservation and community matrix
Balancing heritage conservation and community engagement
Author original image © All Rights Reserved

Four key lessons emerge from this case study that can inform heritage projects seeking to better understand and support the relationship between tangible and intangible heritage. These lessons transcend the specific health and wellbeing context to offer broader strategies for heritage practice and demonstrate the interplay between the focus on physical conservation and community engagement:

- **Position community knowledge as primary evidence in heritage planning:** heritage projects should adopt structured frameworks that treat community memories, oral histories, traditional knowledge, and cultural practices as authoritative evidence within conservation decision-making. Community knowledge holders need to be involved from the outset, using clear methods to document and analyse their insights so that priorities reflect lived experience alongside technical judgement. Such approaches support health and wellbeing outcomes, contributing to wider goals for social and recreational provision and public enjoyment of the historic environment (Ministry of Housing Communities & Local Government, 2024, p. 28,59).
- **Adapt physical spaces to support cultural transmission:** heritage buildings and sites require careful modification to enable effective cultural practice transmission whilst maintaining historic character. This involves understanding the specific environmental needs of traditional activities – for example, geology/topographical requirements for performance, lighting or acoustic needs for storytelling, or

accessibility requirements for different age groups. Adaptations ranging from permanent to temporary can support continuity of cultural practices by creating flexible heritage spaces that can accommodate diverse cultural activities whilst preserving conservation standards.

- **Integration of landscape-scale heritage interpretation within conservation planning:** interpretation should extend beyond individual buildings to include the wider landscape and settlement patterns experienced through movement. This requires understanding how heritage trails, movement routes, and serial vision reveal spatial relationships, topographical influences, and historical patterns that remain unseen when sites are considered in isolation. Interpretation strategies can encourage a dynamic interpretation of heritage settings, recognising that movement through space generates different forms of understanding and cultural meaning than static observations/interpretations.
- **Design historic buildings as active spaces for cultural practices:** supporting ICH often requires allowing practices to adapt and evolve within historic spaces. This demands conservation strategies that accept ongoing, controlled change to support the 'constant recreation' of cultural traditions. Rigid, fabric-first approaches risk undermining the very practices that give heritage sites their significance.

Recommendations

Introduction

These recommendations draw from the full body of work undertaken through the 2023-25 AHRC Innovation Scholars secondment with Historic England. The research explored how intangible cultural heritage (ICH) shapes the experience, management, and governance of historic places, building on the UK's adoption of UNESCO's 2003 Convention and the associated living heritage inventory proposals. Through focus groups with staff, three in-depth case studies, and documentary analysis, the work examined how stories, skills, memories, and community practices influence approaches towards the historic environment.

Across these activities, a consistent set of patterns emerged that help explain how ICH becomes legible within built heritage practice. These are made visible across five 'Cultural Mechanisms' that describe the primary ways in which cultural meaning interacts with physical heritage:

Table 4 – Cultural Mechanisms for making the tangible-intangible relationship 'visible'

Cultural mechanisms

- I Materials** that carry cultural memory
- II Spaces** that support cultural use
- III Practices** that animate conservation
- IV Narratives** that shape significance
- V Experiences** that connect people and place

These mechanisms recur across professions, contexts, and project types. They offer a shared language for recognising the interdependence between cultural life and material heritage, and they underpin the designer principles and decision-maker priorities that follow.

The recommendations are not a procedural checklist but a shift in orientation. They invite practitioners and decision-makers to approach the historic environment as a living cultural process, where significance arises through the interaction of people, place, and practice. They also provide practical guidance for those working across design, planning, conservation, and engagement, offering ways to integrate ICH more confidently and consistently into everyday work.

A 'third register'?

Findings from across the project suggest that the relationship between cultural life and the physical environment cannot be fully understood through the existing categories of tangible and intangible heritage alone. In practice, staff and stakeholders described working in a space where stories, skills, materials, and spatial rhythms are inseparable from the physical settings that hold them. Rather than two parallel domains, they operate as synergistic conditions through which heritage significance becomes visible.

The evidence indicated that practitioners often rely on an implicit understanding of this interplay, even when it is not formally recognised in policy or guidance. What emerged was a conceptual register that sits between – or, more accurately, across – the tangible and intangible: a way of seeing heritage as the product of interactions between people, place, and practice. Within internal conversations this was often described informally as the “glue” that binds ICH to material fabric, expressing a shared recognition that value is generated through how these connections manifest, not in physical fabric or cultural practices alone.

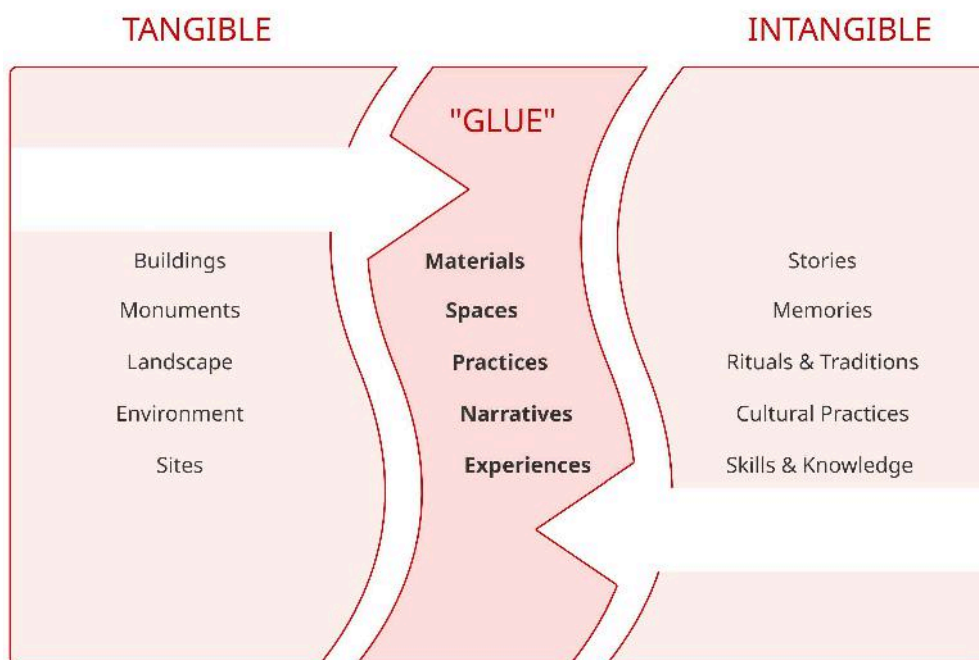


Figure 45 – Cultural mechanisms binding tangible and intangible qualities of heritage
Balancing heritage conservation and community engagement
Author original image © All Rights Reserved

This 'third register' is therefore not a new category, nor a fixed definition. It recognises the conditions under which significance is made legible through situated cultural interactions – the ways in which material traces, spatial arrangements, routine practices, memories, and experiences collectively shape how places are understood and cared for. It is this register that the Cultural Mechanisms help to articulate, offering a structured way to describe how ICH relates to the historic environment.

Making the intangible visible

ICH cannot always be recorded or measured, but it can be recognised, valued, and made visible through built heritage work. This requires decision-makers to approach the historic environment as a cultural setting rather than only a physical record. Design can enable this by supporting memories, practices, and local meanings. Professional methods also matter, from co-created authorships of significance to valuing emotional and sensory knowledge.



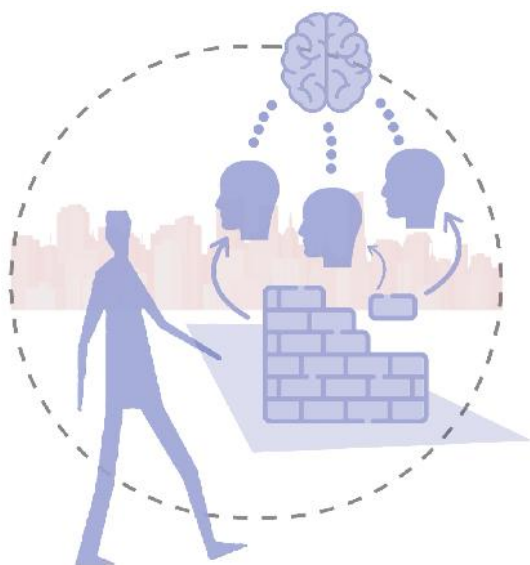
Figure 46 – Middlesbrough Winter Garden Blue Plaque and historic photograph
© Rachel Deakin. Source: Historic England Archive

Making the intangible visible does not mean fixing or simplifying it. It means holding space for complexity, difference, and change, recognising that what makes a place matter often sits in the tangible-intangible relationships that cannot be seen. The Cultural Mechanisms offer a way to articulate how ICH becomes legible without separating cultural meaning from material form. They offer a practical expression of the third register and a vocabulary for how ICH and material heritage work together. What follows is an outline of each mechanism and two sets of recommendations.

- **Designer principles:** focused on how ICH can inform architectural design, conservation, creative reuse, and the curation of physical places.
- **Decision-maker priorities:** focused on the broader methods, responsibilities, and procedural roles of those working across heritage and place-based practice.

Together, these recommendations support a more integrated way of approaching the historic environment that seeks to hold cultural practices and material care in the same frame.

I. Materials that carry cultural memory



Materials can be more than physical components of buildings. They are often embedded with meaning through the ways they have been worked, used, handled, or remembered over time. Cultural memory becomes ‘attached’ to materials through specific processes, the passing down of repair knowledge, or the visible marks of adaptation. Inherited skills and situated techniques give materials an historical depth that links them to specific communities, stories, and practices.

Materials can carry memory because they retain the traces of human interaction – what was done, when, by whom, and why. This mechanism encourages decision-makers to look beyond technical material performance and consider the embedded narratives and techniques that give materials cultural meaning. It encourages a more layered understanding of material decisions – one that considers the cultural and social significance that materials hold for those who encounter or work with them (Table 5).

Table 5 – Designer principles and Decision-maker priorities for materials

I. Materials that carry cultural memory	
Designer principles	Decision-maker priorities
Retain and reveal signs of use and wear to maintain links with the lived history of a place.	Understand materials as culturally significant, not just technically specified.
Use materials that reflect local identity or traditional techniques, especially where memory or belonging is at stake.	Include community insight and traditional knowledge when making material choices.
Integrate recovered or symbolic materials into new works to create visible continuity across time.	Invest in developing and sustaining skills related to regionally important or culturally meaningful materials.

II. Spaces that support cultural use



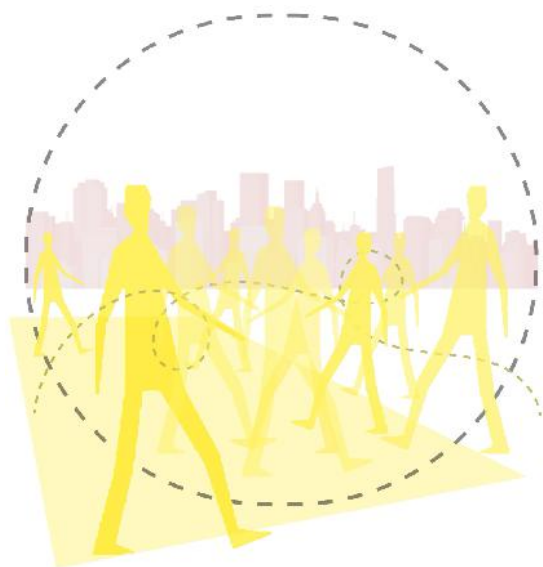
Heritage spaces are shaped by a relationship between buildings, the physical layout of places, and how people use them over time. Buildings and structures define the boundaries, routes, and focal points that give space its form; but it is through repeated use – gathering, movement, ritual, or encounter – that these spaces gain cultural meaning. The physical environment enables certain patterns of use, and in turn, use shapes how spaces are understood, remembered, and valued.

This interplay between the tangible (buildings, sites and structures), the spatial (layouts, routes and arrangements), and the intangible (social and cultural practices and uses) is what makes many heritage places meaningful. Cultural use is not always planned or formalised; it often occurs informally, shaped by access (physical and mental), visibility, spatial configurations, acoustics, enclosure, or orientation. Recognising and understanding this relationship is essential for sustaining cultural life in and around historic environments and is essential to supporting the continuity of use. This mechanism encourages the analysis of how spaces are inhabited, how they create, sustain or give structure to cultural practices, and how they foster or inhibit cultural life (Table 6).

Table 6 – Designer principles and Decision-maker priorities for spaces

II. Spaces that support cultural use	
Designer principles	Decision-maker priorities
Design for flexibility, allowing multiple and evolving uses to take place within heritage settings.	Observe and document how spaces have been and are currently used as part of heritage assessments, including everyday 'life patterns'.
Reinforce spatial patterns that support orientation, arrival, gathering, and movement.	Engage communities in identifying the spatial aspects of cultural practices.
Pay attention to scale, rhythm, and layout in supporting informal and cultural uses.	Consider how interventions might support or disrupt culturally significant uses of space.

III. Practices that animate conservation



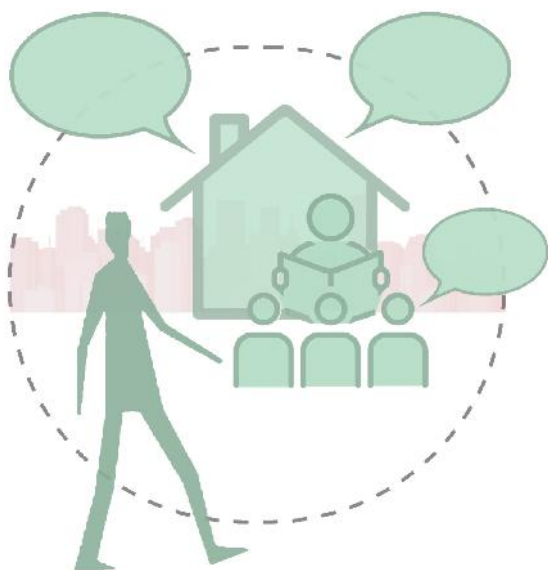
Conservation is rarely a neutral or purely technical activity. It is grounded in specific knowledge systems, techniques, and rhythms of work that are often passed down through doing. These practices include traditional construction methods, repair techniques, sequences of intervention, and the intuitive judgement that comes from long-term experience. Many are geographically grounded – tied to place through the use of locally available materials, seasonal rhythms, or site-specific know-how.

Place often shapes what is practiced, how, and by whom. These practices are frequently embedded in communities of practice – groups of technical trade workers, craftspeople, or local practitioners who carry forward these forms of know-how. This embodied and relational knowledge is not incidental to heritage, it is part of what gives historic places continuity and integrity. It ensures that care for buildings remains culturally rooted, rather than reduced to technical compliance. This mechanism emphasises how heritage is sustained through sustaining the people, methods, and cultures of repair that give it life, as well as through physical upkeep (Table 7).

Table 7 – Designer principles and Decision-maker priorities for practices

III. Practices that animate conservation	
Designer principles	Decision-maker priorities
Make repair visible in design, showing process rather than only product.	Recognise craft skills as part of heritage value, not just delivery.
Provide opportunities within projects for hands-on learning, apprenticeships, or demonstrations of traditional techniques.	Collaborate early with practitioners who hold traditional local knowledge.
Work with details that reflect traditional construction logics or celebrate hand-made qualities.	Support intergenerational skill transmission as a form of cultural sustainability.

IV. Narratives that shape significance



The significance of built heritage extends beyond its material fabric or functional use to encompass the ways people come to care about it through the stories that give it meaning. These narratives – shaped by memory, identity, emotional connection, and lived experience – frame what is remembered, protected, and prioritised. Many, however, fall outside formal assessment and designation processes, remaining undocumented, partial, or contested, and reflecting voices that are local or marginalised within institutional perspectives.

Within ICH, narrative significance is rarely singular; it is layered, negotiated, and context specific, emerging through ancestral stories, everyday use, oral tradition, and emotional resonance. Such situated accounts are often revealed through dialogue, participatory activity, or creative process – including oral history, community mapping, or movement-based inquiry – which expose forms of cultural value invisible within the material form of a site. This mechanism calls for inclusive approaches that recognise, document, and integrate these lived connections within policy, planning, and practice, ensuring that heritage significance reflects the diverse ways in which places are inhabited, used and remembered (Table 8).

Table 8 – Designer principles and Decision-maker priorities for narratives

IV. Narratives that shape significance	
Designer principles	Decision-maker priorities
Design interpretive elements that allow for multiple voices or changing perspectives.	Include community and non-professional voices in significance assessments.
Use embedded features – text, imagery, or interactive elements – to invite narrative connection.	Acknowledge that emotion, memory, and oral history are valid forms of evidence.
Reflect complexity of heritage stories through layering, juxtaposition, or retention.	Be clear about where and how professional judgement is shaping stories being told.

V. Experiences that connect people and place



Attachment to place is formed through lived experience. These experiences are often embodied – shaped by sensory perception, personal memory, repeated actions, and social interactions. People build connections to places through movement routes, gathering points, moments of celebration or grief, and everyday routines.

Often, the meaning of a place is not immediately visible in the built form – it is carried in how the place is encountered, remembered, or revisited. Movement plays a central role in this. The act of traversing, returning, or pausing within a place creates opportunities for meaning to surface. Movement routes may follow established historical patterns, but they can also be designed or curated as new ways of telling a particular story, revealing forgotten histories, or supporting emotional connections. When shaped with care, movement can act as a powerful connector between people and place – a means of making ICH felt and understood. This mechanism draws attention to the affective and experiential dimensions of place and calls for their careful consideration in design and professional decision-making (Table 9).

Table 9 – Designer principles and Decision-maker priorities for experiences

V. Experiences that connect people and place	
Designer principles	Decision-maker priorities
Prioritise human-scale design that invites interaction, comfort, and user return.	Consider lived experience and emotional connection as part of site appraisals.
Include sensory and atmospheric considerations – texture, sound, light – as central to design and historic site interpretation.	Involve local users in understanding how places are navigated, remembered, and revisited.
Plan for how people might move through, pause within, or revisit a place, and consider how design can encourage movement within historic places.	Recognise experience as an active contributor to the cultural value of place.

Conclusion

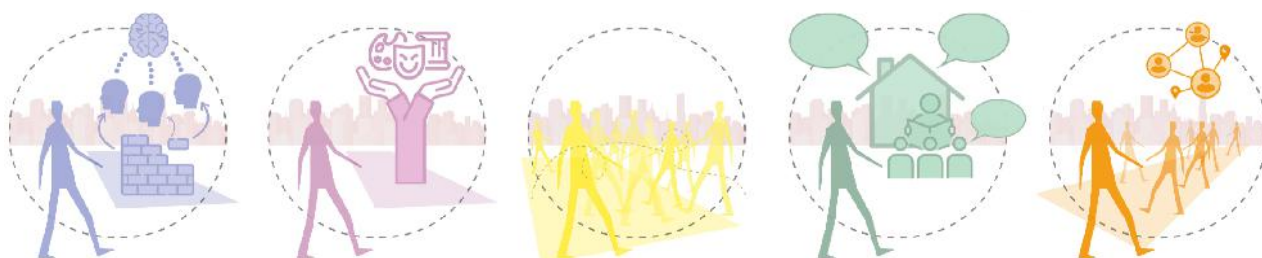
Working at the interface

This report has set out to explore how HE might approach ICH in relation to its core remit and responsibilities. Rather than proposing additional categories or procedures, the findings point to a broader cultural shift – one that sees ICH not as an external agenda but as something already embedded in the ways the historic environment are inhabited, valued, and cared for. The emphasis throughout has been on recognising ICH as relational, situational, and inseparable from the built environment.

The research found that some of the most meaningful forms of heritage practice occur at the interface *between* the tangible and intangible – through lived experience, shared memory, local skills, and emotional connection. The five Cultural Mechanisms this research has uncovered – touching upon important aspects of **materials**, **spaces**, **practices**, **narratives**, and **experiences** – offer ways to approach this interface and work productively within it. Each suggests a way of working that seeks to bind the physical and the intangible together, as well as to reveal any existing cultural “glue” that already ties them together. This has clear implications for both heritage design and heritage decision-making.

Throughout the research, it became evident that HE staff are already encountering and responding to ICH in subtle and often under-recognised ways. The recommendations here are not a call for wholesale reinvention or expansion of remit, but a means of refining and legitimising this existing work.

Supporting skills, involving communities, making space for emotional and sensory knowledge, and designing with cultural resonance – these are not external to conservation but central to its future and societal relevance. If embraced, this approach can enable more inclusive and nuanced forms of heritage significance to be recognised, connecting national policy with lived, local realities. Most importantly, it helps ensure that the historic environment is not only preserved but continually reactivated in ways that remain meaningful to the people who shape and use it.



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