

AHRC Creative Communities

Community Innovation Practitioner Pilot
Policy Paper

Wales Place-Making & Community Heritage

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Policy Context

Heritage in Wales is at risk. Rising costs, climate change mitigation, [budget cuts](#) amounting to [30% in the four years up to 2018](#), and [the slowest growing GDP in the UK](#) risks failing to resource sufficiently the things that give us pride in where we live and who we are: our identity, our places, and our cultural traditions.

[Cuts to heritage services in Wales since 2013 are unparalleled across the UK.](#) Yet, ‘Heritage’ in its broadest sense can enhance social cohesion, community activism, skills and training, [civic pride](#), [place-attachment](#), [innovative ageing](#), [intergenerational collaboration](#), the [Cynefin curriculum](#), [arrest loneliness](#), and tackle [physical and mental health problems](#). A heritage service grounded in delivering public benefit can serve both thematically and practically as the route through which at least four of the seven well-being goals enshrined in the ***Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015*** (WFG) can be delivered.

Co-creation with communities needs to be at the heart of how we tackle this challenge. Currently, our historic environment services are structured primarily to monitor, manage and maintain the built environment. Community engagement exists only as a bolt-on. Yet, by not being more proactive in engendering participation at all levels, we fail to make our built heritage assets meaningful, harness a wealth of volunteer resources, and foster a passion for our past amongst the next generation. The essential risk is that heritage assets become isolated burdens on the state rather than valuable cultural assets in place-making strategies that build resilience and cohesion.

Recommendations

Reverse. Rethink. Remake.

Reverse Funding Cuts to Heritage Services in Wales

A [2018 study](#) found that when population numbers are indexed against devolved government funding for statutory heritage environment services, £15.67 is spent per capita in Scotland compared to £7.55 in Wales. Recent proposed cuts to the funding of heritage services in Wales have brought into question the scale of the present provision and [placed at risk essential statutory services](#). A mantra of ‘protection’ has emerged out of this situation, prioritising maintenance over and above the very reasons we protect heritage in the first place – people and communities.

A central requirement of this policy recommendation is that we **reverse a culture in Wales where heritage is seen as a burden rather than an opportunity**. This is where the funding stream for this recommendation lies: in the determined **migration of funds back from remedial healthcare towards activities that prevent health issues in the first place**, recognising that the pathway to achieving this lies in place-based

engagements within which heritage, belonging and identity are an essential component.

Rethink the Value of Heritage for Future Generations

New outlooks, skills and fresh ideas will need to be developed in a sustained capacity-building exercise across the sector, developing teams of practitioners that are taught how to manage, maintain and monitor but also how to communicate value in heritage and unlock its potential for public benefit in the areas outlined below. A new agency – staffed with a broad and agile remit of skills – would give confidence to investment to bring spending per capita on heritage in Wales up to the same levels enjoyed in Scotland and England. Communities in Wales should not be sold short on the value of their heritage to their local and regional distinctiveness, and to the future health and well-being of its people.

Remake Heritage Services in Wales

The sustainability of Wales’s heritage services sector depends on changes designed to deliver innovations aligned to WFG. **A single Community Heritage/Place-making agency is required to deliver co-creation, engagement and participation in heritage**

not as a bolt-on to the existing management, monitoring and conservation currently delivered by historic environment services but as the underpinning framework within which heritage actions are taken.

There is no need to reinvent the wheel because **Heneb provides an existing delivery infrastructure** within which to house this agency. However, to subvert the present lack of clarity and conflicts of interests in where community heritage and public benefit sits, **the commercial activity of the Welsh Archaeological Trusts requires decoupling from their statutory and charitable roles.**

The functions of this new agency within the Heneb framework **would be indexed to the WFG** resulting in a heritage services sector predicated on a **bold forward-looking vision for Wales** and not one that traces its roots in early twentieth-century conservation principles derived from a largely English context.

Acting as both mediator, facilitator and co-creator, the agency would serve to better index heritage narratives to local concerns, providing meaningful local value and engendering enhanced place-attachment. Where socially engaged participatory activity is low, the agency can intervene with ‘seed’ activities and where skills and expertise are lacking, a framework for place-based accredited pathways to management, stewardship and communication can be provided,

helping community groups to understand statutory requirements in the management of the historic built environment, principles of Equality, Diversity and Inclusivity, pathways to Net Zero, and to factor succession planning into their work to build resilience in a stronger and more cohesive Wales.

Fostering close collaboration with [The National Lottery Heritage Fund](#) and the [Wales Council for Voluntary Action](#), and building on the strengths of the [National Principles for Public Engagement](#), the agency would provide community groups with a co-created pathway to enhanced activity, recruitment, and stewardship of heritage assets.

From inception, through development, to delivery and implementation, this agency can serve as the scaffold through which other social programmes can be delivered, combatting social isolation, referring social prescriptions, incorporating skills development programmes for young people, and offering alternative educational provision where the mainstream is failing.

Local-level community-driven interventions in heritage assets and stories can be supported by this agency. Collaborations with local creative artists can result in outputs and resources for Cynefin initiatives at levels KS2 and KS3, to stimulate greater civic engagement and enhance place-attachment in young people.

Devised in tandem with sector expertise, a **Community Heritage Accord** would require that upon meeting a checklist of standards, local authorities and statutory heritage bodies would be under obligation to acknowledge and act on community-driven heritage agendas, to tailor funding and resources to support communities to fulfil their ambitions. The accord would give confidence to community asset transfer processes and place more power of stewardship in community hands.

The agency would provide more teeth to the WFG in [Land use planning and Place-making](#) and help it to deliver on its Vision for Wales in 2050. It would ensure that mitigations are put in place from the outset so that corporate and commercial developers engaged in place-making and ‘heritage-led regeneration’ projects set aside resources to appropriately and meaningfully co-produce with communities and incorporate them sufficiently beyond the role of passive consultees (especially when public funding has been used as a lever).

Directly, this new agency housed within Heneb would contribute to delivering the following goals from the **WFG**:

- **A Resilient Wales**
- **A Healthier Wales**
- **A Wales of Cohesive Communities**
- **A Wales of Vibrant Culture**

It is imperative that we avoid the presently idiosyncratic system where delivering heritage-derived public benefit through developer-led infrastructure projects and place-making strategies hangs on the internal motivations of the developer, and requirements that may or may not be set by local authorities and consultants in tender briefs. The key thing here is that in devising co-created heritage visions for our people and places, this agency can ‘[secure increased influence higher up the supply chain](#)’, putting people, rather than profit, first.

Devolved Context

As an immediate first step, a **Transformation of Heritage Services Delivery Group** (akin to the [Transformation of Children's Services Delivery Group](#)) **should be commissioned** by the Senedd.

Wales has the essential structures with which to deliver this recommendation. Uniquely in the UK, it operates the arms-length body Heneb, an amalgamation of the Welsh Archaeological Trusts, a potentially innovative delivery partner and an opportunity to grow a heritage sector where community value and public benefit sits at the heart of its operations. Wales's new and innovative [Historic Environment \(Wales\) Act \(2023\)](#) provides the framework for partnership schemes and guardianship offering potential for managed [community asset transfer](#). The number 1 priority of the recent [Evaluability Assessment of Connected Communities Strategy](#) was the increasing of opportunities for people to connect through '*physical* (my italics) activities, volunteering, culture, heritage and the arts'. The [Place-making Charter for Wales](#) provides an innovative framework through which communities and the [planning directorate](#) can deliver on the WFG goals.

But this recommendation also sits, like 'heritage' as a theme, across a range of sectors and ministerial briefs. As the primary legislation under which the recommendation is positioned the WFG provides the essential guiding principles, making the WFG Commissioner's office a key instigator. Joined up thinking between the Cabinet Secretaries for Culture and Social Justice; Health and Social Care; Housing, Local Government and Planning would go some way to seeing that our heritage is more robustly positioned at the heart of Welsh Government as the means by which to achieve by 2050 its aims for **cultural vibrancy, improved health outcomes, cohesive communities and greater societal resilience**.

Further Information:

For more information on AHRC Creative Communities visit <https://creativecommunities.uk/>

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