

# A place-based perspective on intangible heritage benefits of language and dialect

Considerations for policy and practice developed from a selection of Nottinghamshire projects

A stakeholder working paper

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# Overview

## What is the problem?

Language is a crucial part of our sense of identity, belonging and place and as such, an important aspect of our heritage to engage with. However, research by Braber (2016) has found that young people from Nottinghamshire tend to negatively evaluate their own accents, are unlikely to name Nottingham when discussing dialect areas around the UK and are unlikely to recognise local accents. Braber and Robinson (2018) have further noted that the East Midlands is often neglected from studies of regional speech in the UK and tends to be viewed as a 'transition zone' between north and south.

This is important because language plays a pivotal role in people's identities and feelings of belonging of individual and community identities, yet it lacks structured, systematic frameworks to ensure that it is safeguarded and revitalised for future generations.

Engagement with linguistic heritage is a key tool for promoting wellbeing and restoring pride in communities that feel neglected or minoritised. The UK Government's 'levelling up' agenda calls for interventions to 'restore a sense of community, local pride and belonging, especially in those places where they have been lost' and 'empower local leaders and communities, especially in those places lacking local agency' ([Levelling Up The United Kingdom, 2022 White Paper](#)). Research carried out in Australia by Gibson et al. (2021) suggests that engagement with aspects of cultural practices and the sense of belonging to a cultural group may have a considerable positive impact on wellbeing.

The projects shared in this working paper and the recommendations that have been drawn from this work highlight a need to promote, protect and value linguistic heritage to both strengthen communities and improve the places we live and work in.

## What did we do?

In response, Nottingham Trent University's Celebrating Notts Language project (led by Professor Natalie Braber) worked with local community groups and project partners to raise popular awareness of, and elevate the status of, the varieties of language spoken in Nottinghamshire.

The project had three strands:

- a series of plays using local language and dialect to explore local identities involving youth and adult theatre groups at Mansfield Palace Theatre;
- an online map showcasing the varieties of language spoken in Nottinghamshire in 2022 collecting data from individuals around Nottinghamshire; and
- an exhibition (online and in libraries) using illustrated dialect words to inspire poetry and creative writing in schoolchildren and adults (funded by the Arts Council) which worked with local schools.

This work was evaluated by McIntyre Business Services, an external and independent evaluator. This evaluation engaged with all three strands of the project before and after the delivery. It engaged with a broad range of stakeholders to understand the impacts of the project and its value to individuals and the communities they are from. The full report from their work is available on request.

## Overarching Evaluation Findings and Key Recommendations

The three connected projects and evaluation have explored the difference these projects made to people's experiences. Findings and recommendations from the whole project are shared below to stimulate discussion and debate about the value of language and dialect in our society. The research team have set out to explore the role language and dialect play in society and to help build the case for a broader and deeper understanding of their value to individuals, communities and wider society. There is a deeper goal to understand how these aspects of identity could be showcased and protected in the UK.

## What did the evaluation find?

The project provoked pride in local communities, enhancing feelings of connection and belonging to local places, many of which have experienced economic and social turmoil following, for example, the closure of coal mines, the Covid-19 pandemic and the cost-of-living crisis.

The evaluation supported the research team's hypothesis that intangible heritage such as local dialect and language can be a powerful tool for individuals and groups to enhance their connection to place and provide valuable experiences and opportunities for participants, audience members and practitioners. It showed that programmes such as these can:

- increase public participation in cultural activities
- increase awareness and raise the profile of linguistic heritage amongst the public and heritage sector
- enable people to learn new skills

By helping to strengthen a connection to their communities and increase an awareness of their background we hope that those who engaged with the project and outputs of the participants help to enhance agency and empower communities. We recognise that this project alone cannot do this, but it needs to be considered and included in debates about placemaking, levelling up and how we all play a role in building a country that can adapt and flourish in an ever-changing world.

It helped to prove that although people are very interested in language variation, they tend not to consider language as heritage until they engage with it and realise that it is of as much value to culture and identity as more tangible forms of heritage like objects and buildings.

## What do we want to see change?

The findings of the evaluation in combination with our broader academic understanding of language, dialect and intangible heritage leads us to recommend that dialect and language must be recognised as an important part of people's heritage and that as a country we should protect and celebrate the intangible heritage assets of language and dialect for current and future generations.

We recommend that as a society we should be highlighting the

importance of linguistic diversity and celebrating it rather than vilifying people for using their own local lexicon or pronunciation.

Whilst the UK Government has not ratified the UNESCO Convention on Intangible Heritage, we call on all cultural and arts organisations and spaces to engage with and include language and dialectal diversity in their work to help deepen our connections to place, protect our history and reach out to communities and audiences to welcome their voices in.

This project has highlighted the value language and dialect engagement can bring to a selection of different cultural projects and hopefully showcases ways forward for others. We recommend key organisations and agencies such as the Arts Council promote and showcase these types of projects to dispel any myths that working with language and dialect is difficult. We are calling for leading practice guidance to be developed to support creative practitioners and institutions to include and consider language and dialect in new work and commissions.

An NTU roundtable in March 2023 showcased 10 projects that explore language and dialect that will act as a marker in the sand to promote and celebrate our understanding while we also call for more support to research this topic so we can make the case for further engagement and support. The contents of this paper were used to stimulate the event and subsequent research and knowledge exchange work.

# Insights from the three strands

To justify the recommendations and contextualise the findings this working paper will detail each of the three strands' activities and their findings. Each strand was developed to test a different aspect of language and dialect use within the community and to explore the difference it would make to participants, audience members and practitioners to further our understanding of the importance of embedding intangible heritage focused activities within our communities.

## The Plays

### What was done

In collaboration with our project partners at Mansfield District Council and Mansfield Palace Theatre, we worked with Mansfield Palace Youth Theatre and local playwrights and theatre groups to develop and perform a series of three mini plays in November 2022. Each play had a strong focus on identities; two focused on local identities – in response to changing communities and the decline of the coal mining industry - and used language, including dialect, to explore these. A further play developed by the Youth Theatre explored young people's identities and language in the context of the turmoil they experienced during the Covid-19 pandemic. The plays were designed to raise the profile of a range of language and identities from communities shaped by the area's industrial and mining heritage that often feel forgotten since their workplaces and community hubs closed.

*(images provided by Scruffy Whippet)*



The project provided opportunities for local people to develop skills such as playwriting, public speaking and acting. Performances took place in innovative settings (in the Mansfield Palace Theatre bar; with the audience seated on stage and the performance taking place on the balcony/gallery; and in a non-theatre Old Hall church building in Warsop). Ticket prices were kept low to encourage local people who might not traditionally attend the theatre to attend performances and enjoy participating in this cultural activity. All productions sold out, indicating high levels of engagement.

Mansfield was chosen because it is ranked within the bottom 10% of worst performers for social mobility in the UK, falls within the top 15% of most deprived areas in the UK and 'a third of all residents in Mansfield do not feel that they belong to their local area leading to low levels of involvement in community based activities' ([Making Mansfield Towards 2030: A Plan for Aspiration, Mansfield District Council](#)). NTU also has a civic focus on Mansfield where it has sought to engage and embed its work in the community helping to develop opportunities for citizens and business.

## What we learnt

The key learning points from this strand were that the use of innovative locations and topics can both increase and broaden engagement by participants and audience members. Practitioners and participants felt that the focus on language and dialect helped them develop better outputs and connections. Young people felt able to connect to their sense of identity using language to do so.

## The Online Map

### What was done

The project engaged with hundreds of schoolchildren, ex-miners, poets, musicians, university students, community groups and other local people who call Nottinghamshire 'home', whether they have always done so, or have moved into or out of the area. We invited them to participate in workshops and short interviews and to make audio recordings to share what language means to them:

- Their favourite words and expressions – including dialect, family-specific language (familect), language varieties associated with people from an ethnic group (ethnolect)
- Work-related vocabulary or expressions



- Poems, stories and songs which invoke place
- The language spoken by their communities, grandparents, parents, children and grandchildren
- How they feel about their language heritage



(<https://celebratingnottslanguage.co.uk> Website design by Reflex Studios)

In collaboration with an apprentice sound editor and a web designer, we produced [an interactive, publicly available online map](#) to showcase these audio clips and to celebrate the language of Nottinghamshire. The map has been designed to appeal aesthetically to a broad audience and to be user-friendly for a range of people with varying technological literacy to ensure that our linguistic data sparks popular enthusiasm and continues to 'belong to' the people who have produced it.

### What we learnt

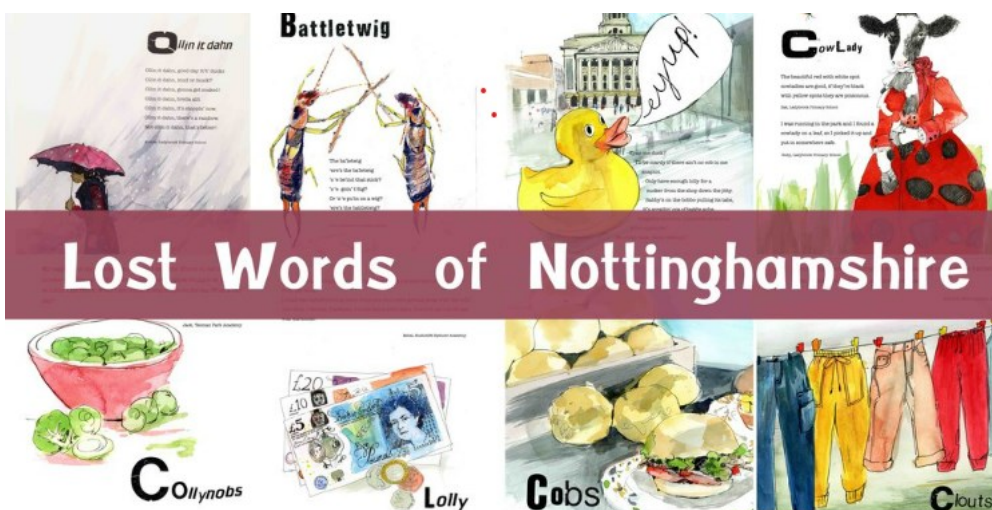
Evaluation has been ongoing throughout the project and has found that sharing and celebrating linguistic heritage had an overwhelmingly positive impact on our participants and their wider communities. Project evaluation also indicates a positive impact on students' studies, engagement with linguistic heritage and aspirations to study language at University. Those involved expressed a desire to become involved in projects on language in the future.

## The Exhibition

### What was done

The Lost Words project was led by Professor Natalie Braber in partnership with Inspire Libraries and supported by funding from Arts Council England and Miner2Major Landscape Partnership Scheme. It involved working with creative writer, Andrew Graves, and artist, Hannah Sawtell, and local schoolchildren from 10 schools (primary, secondary and special needs) and young people to create poetry and short stories inspired by Nottinghamshire dialect. The project team ran workshops across Nottinghamshire sharing the dialect words and illustrations and enthusing participants about language. The exhibition, featuring 27 illustrated words/phrases and creative writing, toured for 249 days around 6 Inspire Libraries in Nottinghamshire, attracting around 70,000 views of the exhibition. Inspire Libraries additionally created an outstanding online exhibition which included information about the project, photos from the live exhibitions and a full online exhibition - which meant that all illustrations and more work [produced by the students was made available to the wider public](#).

The project has a further legacy in that all schools were given a copy of the resources so teachers could continue to use the sessions in future years. Teaching resource packs produced in collaboration with First Story and Andrew Graves, are available on the exhibition website and were also shared by First Story and Nottingham UNESCO City of Literature. The exhibition has also been displayed at Boots Library, on NTU's City campus.



*(image from the exhibition landing page)*

### What we learnt

The Lost Words Exhibition provided a broad engagement opportunity for the people of Nottinghamshire libraries with over 70,000 views of the project webpages and exhibition assets (50 dialect specific words

explored and illustrated with poems created from them). These assets which were co-created with 10 schools and a workshop of 30 adults highlights the interest in local language. The evaluation highlighted the scale of engagement and opportunity to undertake further work in this area. The young people commented strongly that they felt free to use their own language and less constrained than in 'normal' writing exercises. The artist and writer were able to engage with large numbers of young people and try new practices.

## **The evaluation in detail**

Full details of the evaluation, its methodology and results are available on request from Professor Braber. It explored if the project had met its brief to:

- increase public participation in cultural activities, particularly amongst those who would not normally engage in heritage activities
- increase awareness and raise the profile of linguistic heritage amongst the public and heritage sector
- enable people to learn new skills

To do this it used pre- and post-project evaluation forms completed with schoolchildren, theatre groups and theatre audiences, whilst also undertaking follow-up interviews with project partners and creative practitioners. The evaluator also distributed and analysed written surveys conducted with teachers and reviewed the data relating to Lost Words libraries exhibition such as visitor numbers, website measurement from Lost Words project site and Dialect Map site. The feedback from this evaluation has informed this short report that aims to engage stakeholders to consider the next steps.

# Findings, barriers, opportunities and recommendations

By combining findings from all three strands and linking that to our current understanding we have drawn together three key findings.

- Language diversity in Nottinghamshire is rich and includes dialects and multilingualism. It can be harnessed as a tool for enhancing wellbeing, (re)building communities, raising aspirations and upskilling local people.
- Increased public engagement with linguistic heritage can promote a sense of 'pride in place' and increases engagement in local culture. It encourages people to recognise the value of their communication skills and to use them to reach their economic and social potential.
- The UK has no national framework for safeguarding language or other forms of intangible cultural heritage as the UK has not ratified the UNESCO Treaty on the Safeguarding of the Intangible Heritage. It is therefore missing out on the opportunity to develop this area as a means of levelling up local communities.

These three findings have informed the development of a series of recommendations that we present here for consideration. These recommendations will be shared with key stakeholders to further refine and develop and to explore how as a collective group of interested parties we take them forward and develop the change we want to see to support and harness linguistic heritage to benefit citizens, organisations and the communities they are based within. These findings can be rolled out across a wider national level to other communities.

## Barriers and opportunities

- **Recognise the potential for language heritage initiatives to contribute to the levelling up agenda.** Celebrating linguistic diversity is a powerful tool for teaching communities about their neighbours, recognising all the benefits that multiculturalism has

to offer and showing deprived communities that they are not forgotten. Ensuring that projects are led from within communities is key to this, to ensure that they retain ownership and control of their own heritage. It gives local people the tools to build and refashion their own communities and to raise aspirations within and beyond local boundaries. Diverse varieties of English and additional languages should be recognised as powerful communication skills that can be used to drive communities forward and to enhance employability.

- **Increase funding for language heritage.** A relatively small amount of funding, combined with local authority, academic and local community involvement, can have a big impact on a local area but this is often challenging to maintain in the medium to long term. However, community members are willing to volunteer their time and skills to contribute to projects they feel have a social 'good' and our project shows that such interventions are likely to have a legacy beyond the initial funding period.
- **Upskill local communities and professionals.** Our wider work with professionals across the heritage sector tells us that many people working with e.g., industrial heritage and dialect are aware that there is a wealth of language and intangible heritage surrounding their collections, but they lack the skills and knowledge necessary to work with it and do not know how best to engage with local communities. They need support, guidance and training to reap the benefits of this key aspect of local culture. There is a need for a carefully planned framework to deliver this at a UK-wide level.

## Recommendations

- The findings of the evaluation in combination with our broader academic understanding of language, dialect and intangible heritage leads us to recommend that dialect and language must be recognised as an important part of people's heritage and that as a country we should protect and celebrate the intangible heritage assets of language and dialect for current and future generations.
- We recommend that as a society we should be highlighting the importance of linguistic diversity and celebrating it rather than vilifying people for using their distinct wording and phrases.

- Whilst the UK Government has not ratified the UNESCO Convention on Intangible Heritage we call on all cultural and arts organisations and spaces to engage with and include language and dialectal diversity in their work to help deepen our connections to place, protect our history and reach out to communities and audiences to welcome their voices in.
- This project has highlighted the value language and dialect engagement can bring to a selection of different cultural projects and hopefully showcases ways forward for others. We recommend key organisations and agencies such as the Arts Council promote and showcase these types of projects to dispel any myths that working with different languages and dialects is difficult. We are calling for leading practice guidance to be developed to support creative practitioners and institutions to include and consider language and dialect in new work and commissions.



## About the authors

### **Natalie Braber**

Natalie Braber is Professor of Linguistics at NTU. Her research focuses on sociolinguistics, with a particular interest in accents and dialects. Her work includes language variation in the East Midlands, the language of coal miners (pit talk) and engaging with language as heritage. She also investigates accent discrimination of barristers and social stereotypes around specific accents in ear witness testimonies. Her research has been funded by the ESRC, AHRC, National Lottery Heritage Fund, the Arts Council, the British Academy and the British Association of Applied Linguistics.

### **Victoria Howard**

Victoria Howard worked as a Research Fellow at NTU. Her research interests lie in professional communication, language and identities and sociolinguistics. As part of this project, Victoria has been engaged with local communities to carry out recordings and also interviewing museum professionals to investigate museum practices in relation to linguistic heritage.

### **Rich Pickford**

Rich Pickford manages Nottingham Civic Exchange, NTU's place based think tank which maximises the research NTU colleagues and partners undertake and leads on the School of Social Sciences policy engagement work. He has supported the C19 National Foresight Group and is currently exploring the links between informal work and labour exploitation and has been funded in this work by the Home Office and the Arts and Humanities Research Council. He has also recently completed an evaluation of the first activation of the National Emergencies Trust which was funded through the ESRC. Rich is also an active member of the University Policy Engagement Network and is Co-Chair of the ARI sub-committee.

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