Suffolk Archives' inside guide to award-winning



The Beyond Labels exhibition brings together stories and experiences of disabled people in Suffolk. Credit: Simon Lee Photography.

The Hold's latest community engagement on disability history is the result of years of learning from projects and exhibitions that reflect and are driven by local people.

In September 2020 Suffolk County Council opened The Hold – home to its archives and library – in Ipswich with the help of £10.3million in grants from us. The archives team began building relationships straight away – with community groups, schools and the nearby University of Suffolk. The team also considered their legacy and how to ensure the groups they worked with would return after each project had finished.

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>
> *Emily Shepperson, Exhibitions and Interpretation Officer*

Early work exploring stories of the local LGBTQ+ community was followed by another project celebrating migration to Suffolk, which won a Museums + Heritage community engagement award in 2025. Mandy Rawlins, Audience Development Manager, says "acting authentically and honestly" has been the key to meaningful collaboration with community groups.

She continues: “It gives participants confidence about how their contributions will be used in an exhibition, and that their identity will be visible.”

In November 2025 Suffolk Archives began its latest community project, Beyond Labels: Celebrating Disability in Suffolk. Supported by our grant of £140,000, the project is sharing and collecting personal experiences of people with disabilities across the county.

Putting in the time to develop trust with groups

Emily Shepperson, Exhibitions and Interpretation Officer, says the team considers their approach – the language they use and cultural challenges to be conscious of – before contacting groups who face exclusion and discrimination.

The next step, particularly with people or groups responding to an open call for the first time, is building trust: “In who we are as an organisation, what we're doing and why we're asking for people's time, energy, advice and stories.

“Then [redacted]d, but it's imp[redacted]



Events celebrating the cultural traditions of communities living in Suffolk are key to bringing in new visitors to The Hold, such as this community celebration of the Arrivals: Celebrating Migration to Suffolk project. Credit: Suffolk Archives.

Emily advises that taking feedback seriously matters: “When you ask for people's opinion, be clear what happens next with those suggestions. Implement them in a way that people can see and use, or have an open discussion if changes aren’t possible right now.”

Embedding accessibility at The Hold

A community forum made up of people with lived experience of disability and those representing local disability organisations is shaping the Beyond Labels project and exhibition. Acting as a critical friend, the forum provides feedback, ideas and critiques to inform the Suffolk Archives team's work.

Becca Jackaman, a member of the community forum, says: "My passion has always been about campaigning to improve things. It's amazing that the Beyond Labels project is happening and that I'm able to be involved with it, because disability has always been a big part of my life. To shine a light on disability and how it's not always a bad thing to be disabled, there are positives to it – it's really empowering and I hope it'll be empowering for other people too."

One of the project's ambitions is making The Hold more accessible, making changes to its spaces, how visitors are welcomed, exhibition design and activity planning so that this and future projects are enjoyable for as many people as possible.

The co verlay filters f back on nev ns.



Over 30 local community groups and schools contributed 150 giant decorated labels representing their lived experience of disability to a community art exhibition called Unlabelled, which accompanies the Beyond Labels exhibition. Credit: Suffolk Archives.

Taking participation opportunities out on the road

Once the co-created exhibition at The Hold finishes, a touring exhibition and online virtual exhibition will take the project's work out across the rural county. Mandy and Emily would like to see the project lead to even more community engagement.

Emily says: "We're hoping that people might be interested to host some of their events and activities here at The Hold, or that we can go out and join them at different things that they're running.

"Projects like this are important to remove barriers – whether that's physically coming to an exhibition or perceptions of what an archive is and whether or not it's for them. So we work to make taking part possible for everyone. But also, crucially, we collect material for the archive about a diverse range of people in Suffolk for future generations to benefit from."

To learn more about Beyond Labels visit Suffolk Archives' website or contact mandy.rawlins@suffolk.gov.uk and emily.shepperson@suffolk.gov.uk.

Find out more about co-creating with communities

For more inspiration, read about a Nottingham mental health histories project which adapted its co-creation practices to help people record their experiences through art and creativity.

And take a look at our activity planning, inclusion and interpretation good practice guidance for advice about how to embed community involvement in your project.



School pupils learned about the Second World War as part of outreach activities at The Hold.

A state-of-the-art home for the Suffolk Archives collections at The Hold





School children exploring the National Paralympic Heritage Trust’s Global Virtual Museum. Credit: National Paralympic Heritage Trust.

Online accessibility in action through Paralympic heritage and St Fagans’ secret garden