Dedicated time and investment is increasing application success in under-served places

30/08/2023

See all updates

We take a look at the progress we've made through our Areas of Focus programme three years in, and what we still need to do to meet future goals.

Attachment	Size
PDF View Areas of Focus - year 3 evaluation report as PDF(1.09 MB)	1.09 MB

Our initiative to increase access to funding for 13 under-served areas across the UK is proving successful.

Despite a drop caused by the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, project enquiries rose from **120** in financial year 2019–2020 to **144** in 2021–2022. It's also looking like an increased number of these enquiries will progress to grant award stage.

Since the beginning of the Areas of Focus (AoF) initiative, we've seen an average 8% **increase in successful applications** across the 13 areas. We're also seeing an improvement in the quality and relevance of applications.

> It's really positive to see the impact that the programme has had on our Areas of Focus, especially where we see increased prioritisation of heritage in these areas.
>
> *Robyn Llewellyn, Director of England, Midlands & East at the Heritage Fund*

Meeting short-term outcomes

Our AoF year three evaluation report found we are broadly on track to achieve the outcomes we expected to deliver by this point in the initiative:

- **A wider range of groups are applying for funding**, and as well as increased amounts of funding. More groups are also submitting applications that better meet our priorities, **showing a greater understanding of the broad definition of heritage** and what it can include.
- There is now an **increased prioritisation of heritage within local authorities** and decision makers better understand the benefits of heritage.
- **Strong relationships have been built** with a number of Council for Voluntary Service (CVS) organisations who are **generating new opportunities** by raising the profile of the Heritage Fund.

Looking further ahead

While good progress is being made in the 13 areas, there are a number of challenges to address to ensure success in the medium and longer term.

Our evaluation found:

- Digital methods of engagement were effective during the pandemic, but are not a substitute for face-to-face relationship building, and **in-person activities should be prioritised**.
- **More could be done to highlight best practice projects and show real-life examples to potential applicants** . This work should also show the wider community-level benefits of heritage projects – place-making, health and wellbeing and economic development.
- While successful relationships have been built with CVS organisations, **opportunities for more strategic partnerships with other funding bodies should also be explored**. For example, Historic England and Arts Council England.
- In Scotland and Wales, limited team capacity and budgetary constraints has meant that their AoFs – North Lanarkshire, Inverclyde, Rhondda Cynon Taf and Neath Port Talbot – are unlikely to see the same level of impact as other areas. **More consideration should be given to the funding and resources available to these AoFs**.

Supporting great places

Robyn Llewellyn, the Heritage Fund's Director of England, Midlands & East, said: “It's really positive to see the impact that the programme has had on our Areas of Focus, especially where we see increased prioritisation of heritage in these areas. Heritage sits at the heart of a place’s identity, adding depth, character and value.

“We will continue to work on these key findings and learn ourselves about different ways of working in place, including how heritage can be used to connect communities and boost local economic prosperity and wellbeing.”

Explore more

Read the full evaluation report in the PDF attached to this page, and find out more about some of the inspiring projects we've funded in these 13 areas across the UK.

We are committed to supporting communities to connect with their local heritage, boost pride in place and attract more visitors.

In Heritage 2033 we set out how we’ll invest at least £200m over the life of the strategy to support places to put heritage at the heart of local approaches to regeneration, renewal and wider work to make areas better places to live, work and visit.

Our research and evaluation

We regularly conduct research to discover what is happening in the heritage sector, and we evaluate our work to better understand the change we are making. Read more of our insight.