Intangible cultural heritage good practice guidance

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Intangible cultural heritage is the knowledge and traditions inherited from previous generations and passed on to our descendants. It’s an important type of heritage that’s part of everyone’s life in some way.

By reading this guidance you'll learn what we mean by intangible cultural heritage, why it’s at risk and the different ways it can be saved. It will also help you identify and describe the intangible cultural heritage in your project and take inspiration from previous projects we’ve funded.

What is intangible cultural heritage?

It includes oral traditions,?performing arts,?social practices, rituals and festive events,?knowledge about nature and the universe and traditional crafts. Intangible cultural heritage is recognised internationally by UNESCO under the 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage.

Everybody has intangible cultural heritage (ICH) that’s important to them and their communities: from the practical knowledge to create useful things or care for our environment, to the celebrations, music or stories that have meaning for our lives.

Being involved with this heritage can generate wellbeing, a sense of belonging and help us to understand other communities. It can connect people to their built and natural environment and be a strong factor in placemaking and economic regeneration.

Defining intangible cultural heritage

ICH covers several areas of tradition or practice (called ‘domains’). In reality, there is often crossover between domains. For example, festive events such as carnival will usually involve oral traditions, performing arts and costume making skills.

Below are the different types of knowledge and traditions included in ICH, along with some project examples for inspiration.

Oral traditions and expressions, including language

This type of ICH includes proverbs, tales, myths, nursery rhymes, songs and dialects. Some examples of projects include:

- **The Glens Storytelling Festival, Co. Antrim, Northern Ireland**: this two-day festival celebrated and promoted the heritage of storytelling and traditional music within The Glens of Antrim. Its online events reached children, young people and people of different cultures, nationalities and languages, right through to people in nursing and care homes and people living with dementia.

- **Kernow Live CIC's Kemeneth (meaning community in Cornish)**: As part of a wider ICH project, people learned and shared key words and phrases from the Cornish language to perform medieval Ordinalia mystery plays during the Kemeneth Festival in Penryn.

Performing arts

Includes recognised traditions in theatre, music and dance, for example:

- **North East Circus Development Trust's The Family La Bonche: Who are We?**: Young people created a new show influenced by the historic routines and costumes of renowned local circus performers.
- **Association of Calypsonians, UK's The London Calypso Tent**: recorded and shared the heritage of London's first Calypso Tent, an oral/sung tradition brought here from Trinidad. The Calypso tradition was shared with younger generations, who are building skills and confidence in research and spoken word performance.

Social practices, rituals and festive events

This also includes rites of passage, games and sports, culinary and food traditions, seasonal ceremonies, fishing and farming practices. Projects we've supported include:

- **PlayWorks' PlayBack**: Lunchtime supervisors at Nottingham primary schools learned traditional playground games, such as marbles, hopscotch and whip and top, to encourage pupils and parents to get active and play outdoors.
- **Clyde Fishermen's Association and the Scottish Fisheries Museum's Casting the Net**: the fishermen shared their knowledge of ring net fishing alongside contemporary fishing stories to help preserve their communities' cultural heritage.

Knowledge and practices concerning nature and the universe

This includes knowledge about ecology, flora and fauna, and astronomy, for example:

- **Slough Roots' Remedies Remembered**: older women shared and recorded traditional healing remedies from around the world still used in the UK today.
- **Allen Valleys Landscape Partnership in the North Pennines**: a new observatory and astronomy society was created to encourage people to learn about and understand the night sky. Folk music performances from local bands, storytelling (The Burning of the Allendale Wolf) and a bonfire ritual helped people engage with the protected landscape.

Traditional craft skills

This encompasses the knowledge and skills to make and build things, such as tools and utensils, boats, instruments, costumes and toys. Some examples of projects we've funded include:

- **Preserving and promoting traditional skills and crafts of South Lough Neagh, Northern Ireland**: a dedicated training and volunteering programme encouraged local people to become heritage champions for the landscape, lead guided tours or develop traditional skills such as stone carving and thatching.

- **Southall Panjabi Centre and Desi Radio's Traditional Indian Embroidery, Phulkari**: volunteers explored the vanishing art of traditional Indian embroidery for a radio programme and gave workshops in how to make Phulkari.
- **IVE's Ignite Yorkshire**: a group of teenage crafters learned a wide range of skills, including blacksmithing, rope making, wood whittling, dry stone walling and stained glass, with practical sessions that continued online during the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic.

Factors that are important in ICH projects

To be recognised as ICH, the traditions described above should follow the following principles:

- ICH is also known as 'living' heritage. This means it is practiced now, and constantly evolving to meet people's needs and interests in the present. It is not heritage that is frozen in time and fixed.
- ICH is kept alive by passing on skills and knowledge from one person to another. This is most effective when shared in an active, practical, or hands-on way.
- Skills and knowledge are usually passed from one generation to the next, but could also, for example, be shared between peers or new and long-term residents of a local area.
- Nobody else can decide for a community, group or individual that a tradition, custom or craft is important to their cultural heritage. ICH starts with what people themselves value. You will need to demonstrate community interest in the ICH in your application.

Why intangible cultural heritage is at risk

Some ICH is at risk of being lost. You can include activities to safeguard ICH in your application.

The most common threat to ICH is that it is not regularly practiced or not being passed on to the next generation. For example, this might be because there are few practitioners of the tradition, or they are getting older and there is limited youth engagement and a lack of training opportunities.

Common threats to ICH include:

- the closure of music venues, community centres and other spaces where ICH takes place
- lack of training and opportunities for learning
- an ICH practice not being passed on to the next generation because it is not seen as relevant or of interest to their lives
- economic or market issues, for example practitioners may experience difficulties in earning a living or finding affordable space, people may be unwilling to pay more for local or hand-made products or the time and costs involved in developing skills are not feasible for practitioners
- negative attitudes or policies
- environmental issues
- loss of distinctive local or regional differences and variations
- new products and techniques, which may be cheaper or easier to mass produce
- material shortages or high cost of materials
- losing connections with the community, for example becoming solely a tourist attraction

The Heritage Crafts Association also publishes the Red List of Heritage Crafts, which shows which traditional crafts practiced in the UK are viable or endangered. It also explains why crafts might be at risk.

How your project can help safeguard intangible cultural heritage

Transmission (passing it on)

Transmission is about passing on the skills and knowledge to keep the ICH alive. It involves active, hands-on learning (rather than reading written resources) and includes all types of ICH. For example, learning traditional crafts could involve everything from stone masonry and thatching to making textiles and utensils. Taking part in an active way can also lead to the strongest benefits for people. This can include everything from accredited training and school workshops to informal sharing between individuals. Examples include:

- **Korean British Cultural Exchange's Kimjang, Making and Sharing Kimchi**: this year-long celebration of Korean culture centred around Kimjang, a practice where people gather to make and share kimchi (fermented cabbage). The project included kimchi-making workshops with the wider community and recording and archiving 20 kimchi recipes online.
- **Chiltern Open Air Museum's Handing over the Heritage Baton**: people received training bursaries to develop rural heritage skills and knowledge of traditional farming practices, with a view to filling skills shortages and preparing people for future employment.
- **Uist Wool's Transforming Textile Traditions**: inspired by the community's desire to stop wool from going to waste and add value to local agriculture, this project focused on wool working traditions. It committed to sourcing fibre from Uist or no further afield than Scotland and provided new heritage skills for local people in the Outer Hebrides via paid traineeships.
- **Salford City Council's Traveller Wagon Project: Bringing Heritage Alive!**:20 young travellers and non-travellers worked together to build a traditional wagon and learn about the lifestyle and customs of life on the road. The wagon and an accompanying exhibition have been shared across the local community, including a tour of schools.
- **Dry Stone Walling Association's Get into Dry Stone Walling**: this project provided training bursaries for 12-month accredited placements, with a further six months of support into employment, to develop skills and increase diversity in the drystone walling sector.

Recording

Creating records, or making existing records more accessible, can help preserve knowledge and traditions that are disappearing. It can also help deepen people's understanding of the heritage, raise its profile, and give others the confidence to identify and share their own ICH.

Recording could involve capturing people's stories and experiences, documenting knowledge and techniques or mapping and making inventories of ICH. For example:

- **UK Centre for Carnival Arts's Carnival Archive**: this project created an online archive of all carnival related activity within four counties. People could upload their own photographs and other materials to the archive.
- **University of Leeds's Dialect and Heritage: The State of the Nation**: building on the Leeds Archive of Vernacular Culture, this project captured present day dialect and investigated how the use of dialects continues

down through generations.

Many projects include both recording and transmission. For example:

- **Dance Dynamics's The Lost Dances: The History and Traditions of Northumbrian Folk Dance**: young people interviewed older people to collect stories about lost dances in their local area. They worked with artists to create a new dance inspired by their research.
- **Basketry and Beyond's International Basketry Festival at Dartington**: volunteers researched and recorded the heritage of basketry. Courses were held in basketry skills in the lead up to the festival, which also included demonstrations, displays and hands-on workshops.

Find out more

For further information about intangible cultural heritage, explore UNESCO's information about the different ICH domains.