

Association for Heritage Interpretation

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Best Practice Guide 20

Connecting and co-creating with underrepresented communities

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Designed for screens – no need to print

Introduction

Connecting and co-creating with underrepresented communities is a key aspect of inclusive, diverse and richer interpretation outputs and discourse.

This can create lasting impact for all involved, through new connections, networks, innovation and can spark new friendships and teamwork through collaborative practice.

This best practice guide:

- Highlights why connecting and co-creating with underrepresented communities matters, in compliance with UK legislation, The Equality Act (2010).
- Discusses how lived experiences for racialised communities often permeate sensitivities and trauma.
- Introduces two case studies of inspirational, grassroots, community co-created interpretation, leading to more resonant, richer and representative heritage.
- Shares a range of audience engagement strategies, principles and key takeaways for connecting and co-creating with underrepresented communities.

Navrang Arts, Rebuilding Lives: 50 Years of Ugandan Asians in Leicester by Navrang Arts



Who are our underrepresented communities?

Within the interpretation, museums and heritage sectors, underrepresented communities are the groups and individuals that are often absent or low in presence or numbers participating in heritage whether as a visitor, practitioner, professional or volunteer.

They are often: people with disabilities, people labelled/viewed as black/brown (Black, Indigenous, People Of Colour – BIPOC), women, carers, those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, ex-offenders, the deaf/blind communities, the LGBTQIA+ community, asylum seekers, migrant communities and more.

By broadening our view of who our underrepresented audiences are; their contexts, lived-experiences, skills and knowledge, we can begin to learn from communities and their networks to develop innovative and engaging interpretations that resonates more with underrepresented groups. Our shared heritage is everyone's story and should be accessible to all.



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How can we assess the gaps in audience participation?

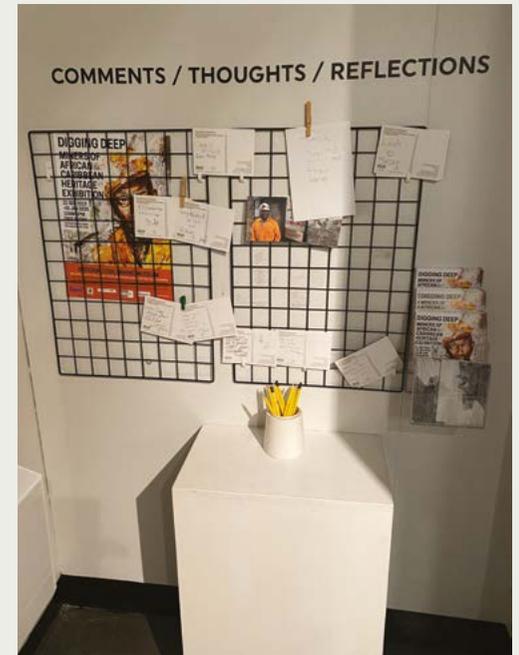
It can be helpful to start by reflecting on the evidence you have about your underrepresented communities and audiences and their needs by asking:

- Who are your existing and intended audiences and communities?
- What do you know about their needs, aspirations, worries and desires?
- What might be reasons for disengagement?
- Who have/haven't you 'spoken' with to find out more? (e.g. through survey, interview, focus group for example)
- Which potential audiences don't you hear from? Why might this be?
- What themes/topics could your work embrace (and never has before)?
- What is the learning from other existing, inclusive interpretation projects you have explored?
- How could you support interpretation that tackles topics or themes prevalent for underrepresented communities? E.g. offer skills, share networks etc. that tackle topics/themes prevalent for underrepresented communities?

Assessing your context and identifying people and communities who are missing from your audiences, workforce or governance, helps start the process of being more inclusive.

Don't forget conversations, informal discussion, focus groups and surveys can help us to hear the voices, opinions and lived experiences of new and existing audiences. This could include video comments, written learning journals or structured interviews too.

Making everyone feel welcome through our interpretation strategy and delivery, as well as working from an active, audience development plan, are important ways to increase vital and varied contributions from underrepresented communities.



Co-design innovative ways for public feedback.
© Black Miners Museum Archive

How can we better connect with underrepresented communities and diverse audiences?

Connecting with diverse communities requires more than widening access – it means reshaping how interpretation is framed, created, shared and experienced through practitioner ‘re-education’ processes.

To build meaningful connections, practitioners must move beyond purely transactional and economic-focussed outreach, towards meaningful connections. These must be built on genuine trust, care, mutual interests, ‘trauma’ awareness, empathy, participatory and inclusive practice, culturally responsive, anti-racism/anti-hate strategies.

Connecting with diverse audiences is not a one-size-fits-all task. It requires bespoke and sustained commitment, genuine care, openness to critique, feedback and a willingness to share authority and power. Connectivity also brings richness, creativity and relevance to interpretation – ensuring that our shared heritage belongs to everyone.

Research from across heritage, museums and interpretation sectors, often point to the premise that many people feel heritage spaces in Western contexts are ‘not for them’ or do not present them or showcase their narratives in positive ways.

This is especially true for working-class communities, racialised groups, people with disabilities, young people – those whose histories and narratives have been marginalised or excluded through time by dominant, traditional, mainstream ‘acceptable’ narratives.

Interpretation has the potential to significantly shift these dynamics when it is developed by connecting and co-creating through critical reflection, effective learning and systematic change.

“Connecting and co-creating through critical reflection, effective learning and systematic change.”

How can we increase sensitivity awareness around race and trauma?

Reduce the use of racialised demographic labelling

A sensitive approach to labelling and classifying people according to skin colour/shade etc. should be trodden with care and consent.

Working with community groups and individuals self-named (but more often politically tagged) as Black/Brown/Black British/Person of African/African Caribbean heritage/person of the African Diaspora/BIPOC (Black Indigenous Person of Colour)/POC (Person of Colour), racially minoritised/Global Majority or Other as descriptors and identifier (particularly in White/Caucasian Western contexts), can sometimes lead to stigmatisation, negative profiling, creating segregation rather than simply referring to a person or group by non-racialised/colour tagging names alone.

Reduce the use of skin colour label identifiers

"As a person with direct lived-experience of being (politically) labelled 'Black' or 'black' (despite having brown skin) and born in Nottingham, England UK (but not considered as 'English'), of Jamaican parentage (but not considered native Jamaican/West Indian/Caribbean) and originally of the Nubian African Diaspora (despite never visiting Egypt), can give you a sense of the challenge and paradox of labelling and categorising a person, based on skin colour, can bring to individuals and communities," says Dr Gregory.

Recognise trauma

Trauma is one of the most under-rated and under-used words of the Black Lives, lived experience in the UK and across the world. Historical, cultural, identity-related, language, social and economic trauma of the past and present, are often overlooked and poorly considered experiences of diverse groups yet often the bedrock of many individuals' and communities' 'backstory', interconnecting (knowingly or not) with interpretation.

Recognising how trauma manifests and by using emotional intelligence towards the effects and consequences of trauma, can help to 'build bridges' of hope, increases our emotional awareness for humanity through kindness (which is free), reducing gaps in racialised audience segmentation.

Underrepresented voices overrepresented in activism

Diverse audiences and individuals self-labelled as BIPOC, are active (and often overworked) in community spaces as advocates, connectors, educators, spokespersons, speakers, teachers, consultants, campaigners and activists – called on to lead and to serve within politically charged arenas around EDI (Equality Diversity Inclusion), often not by choice but by necessity or request.

Under-represented individuals and communities are EVERYWHERE there is injustice, inequality, exclusion and socially constructed systems that hinder and blight progress for all.



How could your organisation better reflect the people you are trying to reach?

Seeing a range of people represented as trustees, in leadership, as staff (not just as unpaid workers and/or volunteers) can help a more diverse range of visitors feel welcome. Interpretation and displays should also be representative. This can make heritage more relevant, inspire participation and encourage empathy and respect between and amongst communities. Supporting underrepresented communities to tell their own stories, develops a stronger sense of ownership/relatability, whilst providing interesting new content to stimulate greater outreach.

**“
Help a more
diverse range
of visitors
feel welcome.
”**

What is the legal framework around equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI)?

As creative practitioners serving all people through our interpretation, this premise should not be difficult, in an ideal world. However, we are taught (indirectly or directly through structural and societal systems) the very opposite through structural racism, inequality, discrimination, stereotyping, racial and skin colour profiling to name but a few destructive, community dis-unity practices and rampant, 'ideological diseases' in our world.

However, where there is disease, there is (often) a cure. It is our legal duty as professionals or voluntary practitioners, through The Equality Act (2010) UK legislation, to become 'EDI champions' for underrepresented communities, particularly all people with protected characteristics to create 'a level playing field' through equity and the application of UK law. Well that's the dream...



“
**The world is
big enough for
everyone!**”

How can we remove audience barriers to EDI and interpretation?

To prioritise the changes that will make the most EDI impact, we need to understand the barriers many people face in getting access to interpretation as well as the kind of changes that could be made. This should be done through consultation with under-served groups, people living with disabilities, potential visitors or volunteers for example and the organisations that work with them. Getting this 'expertise by experience' input, is crucial to helping more understand about what you are doing well and what capacity you will need to be able to do more.

10 Principles for connecting and co-creating with underrepresented communities

1. Relevance

Interpretation must reflect the lives, identities, experiences and values of the people it aims to reach. This involves recognising diverse histories, accepting lived-experience narratives and oral histories, questioning dominant narratives and 'creating space' for multiple perspectives. The most powerful interpretation often arises from lived experience, not just expertise.

2. Representation

People connect most with stories in which they 'see/hear' themselves. Visuals, language variation, tone and voice all matter. Inclusive interpretation avoids stereotypes, discriminatory practice and bias, embraces complexity, intersectionality – reflecting a vibrant spectrum of identities, cultures and experiences.

3. Relationships

Connection/ Re-Connection grows through trust. Long-term partnerships with underrepresented communities, individuals, cultural groups, youth organisations and support services, can ground interpretation into authentic dialogue – not assumption.

4. Access

Removing physical, sensory, social, cultural, financial, digital and other barriers are essential – but not enough. True access also means emotional and intellectual inclusion: feeling welcomed, safe, curious and respected. This includes using plain language, trauma-informed practices, multilingual formats where possible and non-linear ways of exploring content. Pop-up interpretation in public spaces can help reach audiences that might never visit a formal site.

5. Flexibility

Diverse audiences and underrepresented groups engage in different ways. Some prefer immersive, multisensory experiences; others value quiet reflection. Offering a range of interpretive formats – in person, online, written, spoken, visual and tactile, helps create more points of entry for more people.

10 Principles for connecting and co-creating with underrepresented communities

6. EDI-informed interpretation

The global Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) agenda and UK legislation through The Equality Act (2010), suggest that positive representation and inclusion can create space for connecting in new ways, often arises from lived experience, not just expertise.

7. Representation

Peer-led projects create opportunities to share the power dynamics of project leadership. This can foster trust and authenticity.

8. Relationships

Co-create an Audience Engagement Plan as a road map for change.

9. Access

Understand that reframing the interpretation audience through a broader, more inclusive lens, can increase not only economic resilience but more importantly can grow visitor numbers, networks, partnerships, increase knowledge and strengthen social cohesion. Not forgetting increasing wellbeing and better (mental) health.

10. Flexibility

Working with people (particularly young people) from underrepresented communities, can lead to more dynamic, relevant storytelling through co-curation by shifting from one dimensional, hierarchal, 'controlled' narratives to interpretation woven with depth, vibrancy and originality – not just learning it, but living it.

Case study

Digging Deep: Black Mineworkers' Heritage



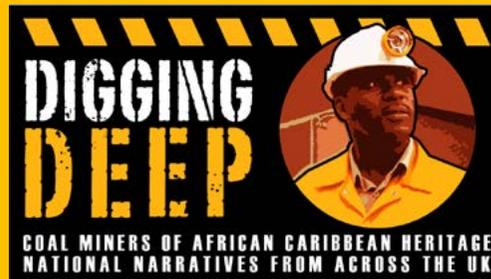
Digging Deep: Black Mineworkers' Heritage

A grass-roots industrial heritage project started in 2010 by the Black Miners Museum Archive @Nottingham News Centre CIC, documenting the lived experiences of former mine workers of African Caribbean heritage.

The project was co-created with former miners as active participants from the start. Interpretation featured many original photographs, authentic costumes, mix-media visuals, oral histories and vibrant interpretation content, revising, adapting, challenging and expanding existing industrial heritage interpretation and museum content.



Exploration and co-creation activities interpreting industrial history of the African diaspora.
© Black Miners Museum Archive



Underrepresented communities' engagement strategies used:

- Direct appeal and in-person visits at local community centres, where the elderly members of the African and Caribbean communities meet.
- Repeated efforts to engage via letters, flyers, in-person talks, print newspaper adverts, email and by hosting reunion events etc.
- Asked for and gained permission for interviews, photographs etc.
- Used radio interview and broadcast media to connect through audio presentations.
- Developed communication skills of participants by including in various broadcast media productions as speakers, researchers and contributors.
- Gave thanks for their courage to speak publicly.
- Place interpretation directly in the community (e.g. pop up touring exhibitions), in local spaces, outdoors and national venues.
- Include personalised/specialised themed tours and bespoke curator walks to address audience needs or requests to learn about something specific.
- 'Gave back' by offering time, mentoring, expenses, payment for professional services (when possible), offer lunch, dinner, tickets to events etc, say thank you etc. in a memorable way for their time, energy and knowledge transfer.
- Support and engage with culturally specific events (view/utilise a Diversity Calendar).
- Engage young people in new skills development activities such as writing, photography, marketing, leadership and 'shadowing roles' to see/learn the process of activities.
- Record (with permissions) the interpretation/audience engagement process. Take photos, lead vox pops and feedback along your shared interpretation journey.
- Use oral history, anecdotes and personal narratives to shape interpretation.
- Extended relationships/friendships with underrepresented communities beyond 'project timeframes'.
- Attended different community group events to experience and to understand their contexts and to support their audience engagement planning.
- Allow space for questions, recognise different perspectives and learn for mistakes.
- Be an authentic part of their story and their journey.



Bespoke curatorial exhibition tours, providing space to relate, up close to interpretation.

© Black Miners Museum Archive

Case study

**Navrang Arts, Rebuilding Lives:
50 Years of Ugandan Asians in
Leicester by Navrang Arts**



Navrang Arts, Rebuilding Lives: 50 Years of Ugandan Asians in Leicester by Navrang Arts

The project, led by Nisha Papat, Project Director, was largely created by the Ugandan Asian community living in Leicester in 2022 and commemorated the lived experiences and underrepresented voices of Ugandan Asian survivors who were expelled from their homelands in 1972, during the Idi Amin era as president of Uganda from 1971-1979. The project was the winner of the Museum + Heritage Award for Best Temporary Exhibition and the AHI Award for Best Community Exhibition both in 2023.

Through determination, perseverance and the need to document history, the group organised and conducted oral histories, collated family photos, archive cine films and rare, cultural artefacts as interpretation sources and materials for pop-up touring exhibitions, events, public engagement and educational activities with a mission that future generations never forget the past and its aftermath.



Nisha Papat, Project Coordinator, helped ensure Ugandan heritage was co-created, managed and preserved by the community for future generations. © Navrang Arts Photo

Underrepresented communities' engagement strategies used:

- Be aware of the trauma and sensitivities of political, social, cultural, national and world events that still affect communities.
- Encourage those affected to tell their story, their way.
- Reuse/Redesign existing exhibitions to cater for different audiences.
- Let communities drive the direction and narrative of interpretation, on their own terms and in their authentic voices and expressions.
- Offer opportunities for multiple generations from the same community to learn and reflect on the events and topics together.
- Empower community members of all ages to help collect, record and share physical, audio-visual and digital content.
- Create 'safe spaces' – places where people can engage and share without fear of judgement or repercussion.



The use and inclusion of personal objects and artefacts to create connections and links to the past, present and the future. © Navrang Arts Photo



Key takeaways for better connections and co-creation with underrepresented communities

- ✓ Try to provide information in community languages, to involve a more diverse range of languages in heritage interpretation.
- ✓ Have 'signals' and 'messaging' to tell people that your site welcomes EVERYONE. By 'speaking' to a wider range of people with different needs, visitors are more likely to have a good experience when they attend interpretation sites.
- ✓ Create 'Interpretation young/youth leaders', can actively and visibly ensure your projects are engaging and speaking to younger audiences.
- ✓ Ensure staff/volunteers who have direct contact with the public, are trained and supported on a regular basis and that concerns and successes are discussed with appropriate stakeholders.
- ✓ Send invitations/notices well in advance of events. This not only increases the chances of new visitors but also shows respect towards people's busy diaries and the value of people's time and other commitments.
- ✓ Learn about your audiences, including who they are, their visit behaviours, motivations, needs, and expectations.
- ✓ Partnering with other community organizations to help identify which 'voices' haven't been well represented, listen to their stories and experiences and work together.
- ✓ Use new knowledge about your diverse audiences as an evidence base for decision-making, planning and programming.
- ✓ Vary communication – online and in person.
- ✓ Digital strategies help expand reach and can build communities far beyond geographic boundaries.
- ✓ Create opportunities for visitors to express themselves 'in the moment' alongside your content.
- ✓ Collect and act on visitor feedback. It shows you are listening and respects the value of audience contributions.
- ✓ Developing top-down leadership to include everyone in defining what diversity means for your interpretation space.

Further reading

The law and regulation around access are important: the UK **Equality Act (2010)** legislation (and Section 75 in Northern Ireland), includes information for making reasonable adjustments to ensure public services are accessible.

Association of Independent Museums (AIM)

Open Up Museums for Everyone

<https://aim-museums.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/Open-Up-%E2%80%94-Checklist.pdf>

(AIM) Open Up Guidebook

<https://aim-museums.co.uk/resources/open-up-guidebook/>

(AIM) Understanding your audiences

<https://aim-museums.co.uk/resources/understanding-your-audiences/>

Arts Council

<https://www.artscouncil.org.uk/developing-creativity-and-culture/communities-and-engagement>

Museums Association

<https://www.museumsassociation.org/careers/competency-framework/engaging-audiences-and-communities/>

Historic England

https://historicengland.org.uk/advice/inclusion/audiences/?utm_source=chatgpt.com





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Biographies

- **Dr Norma Gregory** is a heritage consultant specialising in EDI, diverse audience development and engagement, as well as heritage creative arts production, in the UK and overseas.
- **Nishat Popat** is a freelance museums and arts consultant and a diverse interpretation specialist.
- **Kerri Braham** is a researcher for the heritage sector and marketing officer for new audiences.

Cover image: Digging Deep: Black Mineworkers' Heritage

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