

# *Imagine: a hundred years of homes in Bath*

## Evaluation Summary: engaging creatively with housing archives

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### Project summary:

Funded by the Wellcome Trust, the *Imagine* engagement project at Bath Record Office (BRO) forms part of the larger and longer-term cataloguing, conservation, and academic engagement project '*Building a Healthier City 2: slum clearance, council housing and renovation in Bath, 1890-1995*', also at BRO. Through securing the cataloguing grant BRO was eligible to apply for an additional enrichment grant which allowed the *Imagine* public engagement project to happen alongside the bigger programme of research activity. BRO collaborated with two well-established, local community organisations (Creativity Works and Genesis Trust) and an artist and community facilitator (Ellie Shipman) to deliver engagement projects with two community groups in 2022. The *Imagine* community engagement project aimed to:

- Work with two community groups affected by housing issues to develop artist-led workshops exploring housing archives.
- Deliver creative archive workshops to participants from the groups, to promote wellbeing.
- Broaden Bath Record Office's collections by preserving creative responses from the groups.
- Provide public engagement experience for Bath Record Office's staff.

### Project highlights:

The *Imagine: a hundred years of homes in Bath* project was a great success and a testament to the hard work, passion, and commitment from the many project stakeholders to both deliver on its funding objectives but also to create meaningful and unique opportunities and experiences for the community participants who were engaged with over the summer and autumn of 2022.

*"I have thoroughly enjoyed the course, especially finding out more of the history of Bath in relation to where I am living. I have also really enjoyed doing some art works for the first time in many years. A big thank you to Ellie, Hannah and Drew for making it fun"* Community participant

## 1. Some key project outputs include:

- Delivery of a unique, engaging and positively received community project which connected the BRO to new audiences and allowed for a creative interaction with its housing archive.
- Opportunities for some of the more vulnerable members of Bath's community to engage with the history of housing in Bath on their own terms and produce creative and personal responses as a result of this exploration.
- The creation of a new and hopefully long-term relationship between BRO and two important Bath community organisations, Creativity Works and Genesis Trust – the project is over but the connections will continue.
- Broadening the BRO collections by adding creative, personally nuanced and insightful new material, produced by the community participants, to a new community collection.
- The public event and display at the Guildhall on Oct 24 was a highlight and sense of great pride for many of the community participants and project stakeholders – a great end to a successful project.
- The public event, attended by B&NES senior staff, local councillors and the mayor, brought enhanced visibility to the project showcasing how archives can inspire the creation of artistic works and also benefit participants who engage with the material. This was an important opportunity for BRO to advocate for the value of public engagement with its collections.

*"There was something special about this project. Something about it just magically worked"*  
Community organisation partner

## 2. Key impacts of the project included:

- The artist-led workshops being opportunities for dialogue, sharing and the production of creative outputs in response to a facilitated exploration of the historical housing archive which still has real relevance today. The material and topics covered personally resonated with the community participants own lived-experiences and while sometimes challenging emotionally, provided chances for supporting increased well-being.
- Participants welcomed the opportunity to have their voices and experiences included in the official records – this created a sense of pride but also a chance to democratise and socialise the narrative of the city.
- BRO staff feel that they have improved their skills and confidence in working with community groups and non-traditional archive audiences. This will support future ambitions to both broaden the BRO audience and also develop new more inclusive and accessible engagement opportunities. Further training needs to continue and develop this work have been identified.
- Working with the community participants has been really impactful on BRO staff, especially when thinking about how the archive can be considered through a different lens and worked with in more innovative ways. It has shown the potential for more dynamic and less conventional approaches to research, exploration and use of the collection.
- The project has illuminated a diversity of ways in which connections and links between the archive material can be interpreted and described. This has enhanced the importance and power of the archive for future communities, researchers and city officials.
- Working with non-archival specialists provided opportunities to ask new questions of the BRO collection identifying gaps in narrative, representation, and perspective.
- Additionally working with people with lived experience of the subject matter under exploration was seen as a way to really '*bring the archive to life*' and add a richness, depth and emotional quality not always found in more official records.

- The products of creative engagement with the collection can become valuable assets for the archive itself – they bring in new, contemporary voices and perspectives which will help to diversify the collection and potentially make it more appealing to other new audiences.

### **3. Learning points for future consideration include:**

- Good community engagement work needs to be well planned for and have enough resource, capacity, and support to be done properly and with genuine meaning. Capacity is currently limited at the BRO and so thinking needs to be done to identify how this kind of work can be integrated in a sustainable and realistic way within core BRO activity and the wider B&NES Heritage Service.
- How might the BRO gain greater support and resource from the wider B&NES Heritage Services team to better dedicate time and experience to identifying and connecting with potential new audiences and delivering engagement initiatives?
- The public showcase event demonstrated the potential archives, and indeed BRO, have to draw in and engage a wider audience through creative responses or similarly thought-provoking displays. BRO aims to do much more of this but must identify suitable spaces with both access and appeal considered to reduce barriers.
- Good partnership development with key organisations embedded within and experienced in working with community groups will be key to engaging a more diverse audience for BRO. These organisations have the expertise and connections to a wider audience than BRO can reach alone and could, with proper resourcing, help support skills development, training and confidence building for staff. The BRO can in turn provide access to and understanding of a huge range of archival material which can provide social, historical, and personal value for future engagement activities.
- Projects like *Imagine* can push the BRO along its engagement journey and help deliver on its strategic objects of working with more diverse audiences by making the collection more accessible and engaging. It also shown evidence for BRO being a key social and heritage engagement resource within the B&NES.
- Working with non-specialists has necessitated a different way of working with the archive and its catalogue and prompted staff to think about alternative ways in which records or parts of the collection can be linked, described, interpreted, and supplemented with contextual materials. Perspective gaps have been both identified and filled as a result of this project and finding ways to continue and advocate for this approach will need to be considered.
- The potential use of community-created archive additions is clear but consideration needs to be given to how these can be contextualised and framed to make them of use to the widest audience, including future academics and researchers.

\* A full evaluation report can be requested from the BRO.