

People's History of Leeds: Evaluation Report



Leeds
Older
People's
Forum



Leeds Older People's Forum

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Dr.Sarah Alden, Tom Bailey and Lisa Fearn

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1. About the People's History of Leeds

People's History of Leeds (PHoL) is, at its heart, an oral history project that seeks to understand the history of Leeds through the stories and lived experiences of its people. Rather than approaching history as a search for 'the truth' or a single objective account of the past, the project recognises that people experience, remember and interpret events differently. Individual accounts differ; PHoL values these different perspectives.

Using money raised by National Lottery players, The National Lottery Heritage Fund supports projects that connect people and communities with the UK's heritage. PHoL is made possible with The National Lottery Heritage Fund. Thanks to National Lottery players, this project has developed on the foundations laid by SHINE magazine, a lockdown project. In 2024 PHoL received funding for two years from The National Lottery Heritage Fund. The grant holder was Leeds Older People's Forum and a Leeds-based Project Co-ordinator from Mojo Creative led the delivery and design of PHoL whilst working collaboratively with others. A group of volunteer citizen journalists worked with the Project Co-ordinator to develop, research and write stories for publication. Leeds Museums and Galleries was involved as a heritage partner and third sector organisations across Leeds enabled connections to potential storytellers. An external evaluator was also involved to assess the extent to which PHoL achieved its planned outcomes.

The project can be understood through the three words in its title: People, History and Leeds. People come first. PHoL places the experiences of ordinary people at the centre, recognising that both extraordinary and seemingly everyday lives have historical value. The voices of older people are particularly important. Their memories provide a direct connection to a Leeds that has changed significantly within living memory, and there is an increasing urgency to record these experiences before they are lost. Through interviews and recorded testimony, PHoL preserves these voices while enabling people to recognise that experiences which may simply have felt like 'living their lives' form part of a wider social and cultural history.

The project's understanding of history is similarly broad. The focus is predominantly on living memory, from the 1940s onwards. However, these interviews are supplemented by existing archive recordings. Instead of concentrating purely on traditional accounts of civic leaders, institutions and prominent individuals, the project explores and celebrates ordinary people's everyday history, including themes around work, migration, activism, music, culture and more.

Leeds provides both the setting and the connecting thread. While the city has a well-documented industrial heritage, this represents only part of its story. Leeds has continually changed through migration, economic and social change, new communities and evolving cultural identities. PHoL seeks to reflect this diversity, including experiences that have historically been marginalised or underrepresented. Across these stories, themes of independence, activism and resilience have also emerged as important elements of the city's identity.



How these histories are shared is as important as how they are collected. From the outset, PHoL sought to take the stories beyond audiences who might ordinarily engage with local history. A central part of this approach has been producing physical books and distributing thousands of copies free of charge across Leeds, particularly to older people and through independent venues and community settings. This has enabled the project to put people's stories directly into the hands of ordinary people across the city, rather than relying solely on audiences actively seeking them out online or through traditional heritage organisations. However, in partnership with the books PHoL has developed a significant online presence with thousands of new audience members accessing the website and social media. All the chapters from the book are on the PHoL website, alongside bespoke films, shorter pieces, blogs and audio clips.

This people-first philosophy has also shaped the project's delivery. Volunteer writers, or 'citizen journalists', have helped identify, research and develop stories. Rather than beginning with predetermined themes, PHoL adopts a methodology based on curiosity, openness and participation. This evaluation considers the effectiveness of that approach, the experiences of those involved, and the project's wider contribution to preserving, sharing and celebrating the diverse histories of Leeds.

2. About the National Lottery Heritage Fund

The National Lottery Heritage Fund is the largest funder for the UK's heritage. Using money raised by National Lottery players they support projects that connect people and communities to heritage. Their vision is for heritage to be valued, cared for and sustained for everyone, now and in the future. From historic buildings, our industrial legacy and the natural environment, to collections, traditions, stories and more. Heritage can be anything from the past that people value and want to pass on to future generations. They believe in the power of heritage to ignite the imagination, offer joy and inspiration, and to build pride in place and connection to the past.

3. About the evaluation

The evaluation assessed the extent to which PHoL achieved the five outcomes set out in its Theory of Change

1. Increased social connection and wellbeing for older people, reducing isolation and enhancing their sense of purpose.
2. Enhanced storytelling and journalism skills for older and younger participants.
3. Intergenerational collaboration, fostering greater understanding between older and younger generations.
4. Preservation of Leeds' diverse oral history, involving a wide range of people in heritage and ensuring stories from marginalised communities are recorded and shared.
5. Increased engagement in local heritage by members of the public.

Evaluation approach

A proportionate mixed-method approach was used, combining project monitoring and participation data with qualitative evidence from people involved in, contributing to and encountering PHoL. This enabled the evaluation to consider what was delivered and who was reached, alongside the experiences and changes associated with taking part.

The external evaluator reviewed project documentation, undertook the additional qualitative fieldwork and independently analysed the evidence. This provided an external assessment of progress against the Theory of Change, including where delivery worked, where it developed differently and the learning for future work.

Evidence and fieldwork

Evidence source	Coverage	Contribution to the evaluation
Project monitoring and documentation	Quarterly monitoring returns, participation and demographic information, activity and output data, publications, website/digital information and other relevant project material	Assessed delivery, reach, participation and how the project developed over time
Interviews and focus groups	Focus group and one-to-one interviews with 8 citizen journalists; interviews with 3 storytellers; 3 community and heritage stakeholders; 3 people involved in project management and delivery	Explored experiences of participation, outcomes, partnerships, heritage activity, delivery and legacy
Project and audience feedback	35 documented feedback from storytellers, people working in older people's support services, event attendees, community representatives, social media	Perspectives on events, publications, reach, representation
Older people community hub visit	Discussion with 15 older people at a neighbourhood network	Explored how people encountered and used the publications



Sampling and analysis

Qualitative sampling was purposive. Participants and partners were selected to cover the main perspectives needed to understand PHoL, including citizen journalists, storytellers, community and heritage partners, and those responsible for project delivery. Key partners were included because of their involvement in particular strands of the work. Audience and community feedback added perspectives from people with less direct involvement in the project.

Monitoring data were reviewed against planned activity, participation and outputs. Interviews, focus groups and other qualitative material were analysed thematically against the five outcomes, alongside wider themes relating to participation, delivery and legacy. Greater weight was given to findings supported across sources or by clear examples of change, while individual comments were used to illustrate particular experiences or perspectives.

This was a small evaluation. The qualitative sample was deliberately selected to explore different experiences and parts of the project, while audience feedback was gathered through events and community settings.

4. What PHoL delivered and who it reached

The People's History of Leeds delivered its stories through a range of formats, designed to make the city's history engaging and accessible to different audiences. At the centre of this were the printed books. Thousands of copies were produced and distributed free across Leeds, particularly through older people's organisations and, increasingly, independent cafés, bars, arts organisations and other venues. This physical distribution was especially important for reaching older people who may be less likely to access longer-form stories online, as well as people who might not ordinarily pick up a local history book.

The quality of these publications was deliberate. Professional design, photography and imagery were used to create books that were attractive and accessible, but also to demonstrate that the people and stories featured deserved to be treated with care and respect. The format developed considerably through the project, with individual interviews and memories brought together into themed chapters exploring particular aspects of Leeds and its history.

Alongside the books, the [PHoL website](#) provided a permanent home for longer-form stories and multimedia content. A dedicated section called A Leeds Life emerged during the project to provide a space for individual stories that did not naturally fit within the larger themed chapters. Audio clips enabled audiences to hear people telling their stories in their own voices, while professionally produced films provided another way of bringing personal histories to life.

The project also took its stories directly into public spaces. Pop-up exhibitions at locations including Leeds Kirkgate Market, Leeds Museum, Leeds Playhouse and the White Rose Shopping Centre, alongside book launches and smaller events, provided opportunities for people to encounter the stories in person. Social media extended this reach further, with some content reaching thousands of people who may never have encountered the project through its books, website or community activity.

This activity was made possible through working with three groups: citizen journalists, storytellers and audiences. Citizen journalists formed the core of the project, researching subjects, conducting interviews and helping determine which stories should be pursued. Some remained involved throughout, while others contributed around particular interests or areas of knowledge.

The storytellers were the people who shared their memories and lived experiences. Contributions ranged from extensive interviews to short conversations about a particular place, event or theme.

PHoL actively went to where people were, including older people's organisations, community settings, events and public spaces. This ensured a wide range of voices could contribute.

A particularly important part of our approach was building relationships with community groups across Leeds. This included an extensive partnership with Leeds Black Elders and engagement with Black Caribbean communities, Muslim communities in Beeston, Jewish and Sikh communities, and LGBT+ groups. The aim was not to arrive with a predetermined version of the stories that should be told, but to listen and allow priorities to emerge from within communities themselves. Work with Black communities helped uncover less frequently told histories, including the experiences of Black nurses and the musical heritage of Chapeltown.

This approach helped PHoL capture experiences that have often been underrepresented in traditional accounts of the city, while adding considerably to the breadth and richness of the project. It was also reflected geographically. Activity and distribution extended from inner-city communities including Beeston, Harehills and Chapeltown to areas such as Farsley, Garforth, Armley and Middleton. There was a deliberate commitment to work across the city, meeting communities where they were and ensuring that the stories and publications reached well beyond the city centre or established heritage audiences.

Finally, audiences were not simply the recipients of the project. Through books, exhibitions, launches and events, PHoL brought together people from different communities, generations and experiences, creating opportunities to recognise shared connections and see their individual histories as part of the wider story of Leeds.



5. PHoL in numbers

- 215 individuals shared their stories
- Of these 215 individuals, 26% are from diverse communities, 83% are aged 50+, 44% are male, 38% identify with a faith or religion and 10% identify as LGBTQ+
- 22 older citizen journalists
- 11 younger citizen journalists
- 1,148 volunteer hours given by all citizen journalists
- 23 monthly citizen journalist meetings
- 2 volumes of the printed book
- 9,000 copies distributed in Leeds
- 250 attendees at the Leeds Goth City event at Leeds City Museum
- 130 attendees at the Leeds City Market event
- 87 attendees at the launch of volume one
- 123 attendees at the final celebration event and launch of volume two as part of Leeds 400 celebrations
- 91,510 PHoL social media views
- 5,075 website sessions representing 2,942 unique visitors

6. Outcomes for people involved

Outcome 1: Increased social connection and wellbeing

PHoL supported wellbeing by creating opportunities for social interaction and purposeful activity, prompting positive memories, and helping people feel that their experiences were heard and valued

Relationships, connection and belonging

Participants described social connections developing through their involvement in PHoL. Citizen journalists met regularly, worked alongside other writers and contributors, and valued contact with people they would not ordinarily have encountered. Individual contact from the Project Co-ordinator also strengthened their sense of involvement and belonging. One citizen journalist said it made them ***“feel more important to the team even if you’re playing a minor role”***.

Story-sharing also strengthened existing relationships and created new points of connection. Former colleagues who had worked together in Leeds valued opportunities to reconnect and revisit shared memories. One citizen journalist involved her older mother, who she cares for, in PHoL activities, giving her opportunities to get out, meet people and take part in something different, which she described as ***“like a breath of fresh air”***.

For one storyteller, revisiting the culture and experiences of her youth strengthened her connection with Leeds, bringing back positive memories of friendships, music and social life while giving those experiences renewed meaning as part of the city’s history. She attended the first launch event and valued hearing lives very different from her own, describing the event as ***“a revelation”*** and reflecting: ***“All of our stories knit together... all our stories walk the same streets even if they’re different.”***

The publications also created social connections beyond those directly involved in producing them. At one neighbourhood network, stories and images prompted people to exchange memories and experiences. One participant described feeling lonely after family members had moved to different parts of the country and having relatively little contact with others. He enjoyed hearing and discussing the PHoL stories with people at the group and also shared them with his family. They gave him something to talk about when family members phoned, adding another point of connection to those conversations.

Purpose, stimulation and feeling valued

Citizen journalists consistently described PHoL as enjoyable, purposeful and stimulating. Researching stories, interviewing people and working towards publication gave their involvement structure and a clear goal. The professionally produced books gave that work a tangible public form, bringing a sense of achievement and, for one participant, reinforcing that the time and skills invested, and the histories gathered, were being taken seriously.

Much of the stimulation came from encountering parts of Leeds they had not previously known well. Through researching and interviewing, citizen journalists learned about different communities, histories and experiences. For some, gathering other people's stories became a way of discovering their own city afresh.

The purposeful and collaborative nature of PHoL was also valued by people involved in other ways. One community contributor described the project as having **“broken the monotony”** of running her organisation, giving her a different focus alongside her usual responsibilities.

For storytellers, feeling valued was linked particularly to being heard and seeing their experiences treated as worth recording. One described the value simply as **“putting my story out there”**. Another older contributor, initially reluctant to take part, later joked that she was **“a little star”** after being recognised from the publication. Other contributors were also reported to have taken pride in seeing their names and experiences in print.

Reminiscence and memory

PHoL stories and images prompted reminiscence, particularly where people recognised familiar places, experiences or aspects of everyday life. At the community coffee morning, discussion moved from the booklet into memories of childhood, family life, markets, rationing and earlier Leeds. Similar observations were made elsewhere, including one example where a story that struck a chord helped a family member with cognitive impairment become more animated and recall related memories.

Several participants also identified the value of short personal histories, photographs and familiar local settings for people experiencing cognitive impairment. Several participants also identified the value of short personal histories, photographs and familiar local settings for people experiencing cognitive impairment. Familiar, lived experiences gave people recognisable points of connection and prompts for memory and conversation:

“People like to read it. They find it interesting. Something chimes, ah yes, I forgot about that. It’s good for people struggling with memory. It helps to recall their memories.”

Outcome 2: Enhanced storytelling and journalism skills

PHoL developed storytelling and journalism skills largely through practical experience, supported by initial training, editorial feedback and ongoing guidance. Learning was particularly evident in interviewing, listening, engaging contributors, researching and shaping material, and adapting existing writing skills to a more accessible and people-centred form of storytelling.

Interviewing, listening and engaging contributors

Interview training provided a starting point, with skills developing further through working with different contributors. Some interviews followed a clear story, while others moved between different periods, memories and experiences. Citizen journalists learned to listen for the main themes, judge when to follow prepared questions or let conversations develop and decide when to prompt or steer. Longer or less structured testimony also required them to identify and draw out the most relevant parts of a person's experience.

The relational aspects of interviewing became an important part of the role. Citizen journalists talked about building trust, creating enough safety for people to speak openly and handling sensitive or challenging conversations. As one described:

“You can’t just go in, you have to have a relationship, you’ve got to build some safety. The skill of us as interviewers is to be a listener.”

Participants varied in how comfortable they initially felt approaching potential contributors. Some valued the Project Co-ordinator taking the lead, while others became increasingly confident doing this themselves. Citizen journalists described becoming more comfortable approaching people, opening conversations and following up possible stories, as well as more alert to experiences worth pursuing. This included approaching people at events to ask them to say more.

“I wouldn’t have gone up and spoken to a stranger before, just outside in the street... to find out about their life, but now I would.”

This was also evident in work around Goth culture. One citizen journalist said she would not previously have approached someone from the Goth community and asked about their life. PHoL gave her a reason and growing confidence to start those conversations, with meeting and learning from different people described as ***“mind expansion”***.

Existing community relationships were also important, particularly in reaching underheard communities. Work around Sikh heritage drew on trusted connections to support interviews, access the former Gurdwara building and involve community members. Story-gathering relied on relationship-building and community connections alongside interviewing skills.



Researching and shaping stories

Researching and shaping material formed part of the same learning. Citizen journalists selected and organised information, researched context and considered what readers needed to understand the story, while keeping contributors' own voices central. Shaping lengthy or less structured testimony into a coherent account was part of this process, described by one participant as *“collecting and then crafting”*.

PHoL also extended skills that citizen journalists already brought to the project. Experienced writers described adapting established ways of working to produce clearer, more accessible stories for a wider audience. Ongoing editorial feedback supported this, particularly in finding the balance between providing context and allowing contributors' own words to carry the story.

The citizen journalist role was therefore broader than writing alone, combining research, interviewing, listening, relationship-building and the judgement needed to identify and shape a story.

Interviewing traders and former mill workers similarly developed skills in drawing out people's experiences while opening up unfamiliar aspects of Leeds' social and working history.

Applying and extending skills

Citizen journalists also applied and extended their skills through podcasting, radio, public events and approaching contributors. For one experienced citizen journalist, PHoL also changed the way she wrote. Coming from an academic background, she learned to write more directly for a wider audience, explain context clearly and keep the contributor's own voice central: *“You mustn't make assumptions. You must explain.”* She had previously tried several times to write a book about her experiences in Africa without making sustained progress. By the time of the evaluation, she was actively writing it and felt more confident that she could complete it. She linked this in part to the more direct and accessible approach to writing she had developed through PHoL.



Outcome 3: Intergenerational collaboration

PHoL achieved some intergenerational exchange. The strongest activity developed around subjects with relevance across generations. The wider evidence points to shared interests, sufficient support, flexibility and time for relationships to develop. Reclaim the Night provides the clearest example of this working in practice.

Connecting generations through a shared interest: Reclaim the Night

The Reclaim the Night story connected experiences of activism across generations. Reclaim the Night is a movement campaigning for women's safety in public spaces, with the first Leeds march taking place in 1977. The story grew from the knowledge and interest of a citizen journalist who remembered Leeds at the time of the first marches and knew some of those connected with the movement.

The citizen journalist and Project Co-ordinator attended a contemporary march and spoke with younger women, including women around the age she had been in the 1970s. Their conversations explored experiences across the two periods, including what had changed and what remained familiar.

The story also prompted memories among wider audiences. One storyteller hearing it at the first PHoL launch recalled the atmosphere of fear across Leeds after dark at the time and women organising in response.

The planned youth strand was only partly realised. Feedback indicated that the group had changed between project development and delivery and that the proposed activity aligned less closely with participants' interests than originally anticipated. Stakeholders also felt that some young people needed more support to take part than had been allowed for in the original design. Young people were not interviewed for the evaluation, so their own views were not captured. However, one member of the PHoL team thought that dedicated funded time needed to be available for youth workers to engage young people, and without this the involvement of those groups will remain challenging.

Citizen journalists remained positive about intergenerational working, but some were unclear about the role younger participants were expected to play and felt that more active support was needed. A stakeholder contrasted this with another initiative involving the same young people and an older people's group, where relationships developed before participants decided together to create a map and display. This provided more scope for the activity to develop around the interests of those involved.

Across the evidence, stronger intergenerational activity was associated with a shared point of interest, sufficient support and time for relationships to develop. The experience also highlights the need to revisit plans where participant groups, interests or support needs have changed between project design and delivery.

Feedback pointed to a more reciprocal role for younger participants. Their experiences of Leeds today form part of the city's developing history, while earlier histories of LGBTQ+ rights, activism and wider social change can provide context for issues they encounter now. Intergenerational work can therefore enable both generations to contribute experience and interpretation, rather than positioning younger people mainly as recipients of older people's memories.

Outcome 4: Preservation of Leeds' diverse oral history

PHoL broadened the range of Leeds histories recorded and brought less-heard experiences into public view. Participants valued ordinary lives being treated as heritage, while trusted community relationships enabled experiences to be recorded that may otherwise have remained undocumented. The evidence is strongest on widening and interpreting the heritage record. Longer-term preservation of recordings, transcripts and digital material will depend on arrangements beyond the funded project.

Interpreting Leeds through lived experience

Personal testimony gave wider social and cultural change a human context. Stories about employment, migration, faith, music, sexuality, activism and community life located changes in Leeds within the experiences of people who lived through them: ***“an amazing look back into our history and the hard work our community puts in every day.”***

These accounts also added complexity to familiar histories. Former textile workers described difficult working conditions alongside secure employment, friendships and community. Older Leeds United supporters brought personal memories of following the club into a wider account of the city's social and cultural life.

Placing different experiences alongside one another created a more plural account of Leeds while retaining their distinctiveness. As one storyteller reflected: ***“Cities are made up... by individuals, but not just individuals, they're part of communities.”***

Broadening the heritage record

Participants understood Leeds' heritage through a wide range of lives and experiences, including class, occupation, migration, sexuality, faith, neighbourhood, subculture and community identity. At the first PHoL book launch, 40 people described what made Leeds special through friendship, humour, migration, activism, music, sport, subcultures, parks and a sense of home, placing everyday life and communities alongside more familiar places and events.

PHoL reflected this breadth through working-class and industrial histories alongside Sikh, Black and LGBTQ+ experiences, migration, activism and alternative culture. Participants repeatedly described a people's history as one that recognised ordinary lives as part of the city's heritage:

“Everybody's got a story to tell... The nourishing of people valuing their own stories is really important.”

This included experiences described as Leeds' “hidden histories”, including histories that had been less visible, stigmatised or difficult to discuss. Diversity therefore concerned both whose voices were represented and the kinds of experience recognised as part of Leeds' history.



One community contributor felt that some aspects of Black history in Leeds were already relatively visible, while other experiences remained undocumented. She saw the inclusion of LGBTQ+ histories as one example of PHoL moving further into experiences that had received less public attention.

A Place to Be Me drew on LGBTQ+ experiences across several decades. One storyteller connected growing up gay with music, alternative culture, working-class Leeds and changing city spaces where LGBTQ+ people found community and greater freedom. He valued being able to put his own experience **“out there”** and wanted younger people to understand some of the experiences behind rights and freedoms in the present:

“People have you believe history ended yesterday. No, it goes on.”

PHoL also brought different people into recording the city’s heritage. At Leeds Kirkgate Market, four asylum seekers and refugees took part as one-off citizen journalists. For one established citizen journalist, work at the market and Sunnybank Mills opened up parts of Leeds she had known relatively little about despite living in the city since the 1970s. Interviewing traders and former mill workers developed her understanding of migration, enterprise and working life as well as her ability to draw out people’s experiences.

Reaching some of these histories depended on trusted community relationships. Existing contacts opened routes to contributors who were initially uncertain about sharing their experiences, while also influencing which stories were most readily identified. Citizen journalists recognised the need for future work to continue extending beyond established contacts.

African and Caribbean nurses and midwives

PHoL recorded the working lives of women from African and Caribbean backgrounds who came to Leeds and worked in nursing and midwifery. Their accounts brought together migration, contribution to the NHS and experiences of discrimination at work.

The stories developed through community knowledge and trusted relationships, enabling experiences that had received relatively little attention to be recorded. For one citizen journalist, the interviews were **“opening this window into this world”**, bringing her into contact with experiences largely outside her own.

One storyteller later reflected that **“you don’t know what their stories are because most of them don’t get to tell them”**, capturing the value placed on bringing these experiences into the public history of Leeds.



Wider audience feedback was largely positive about the range of stories included, although there was occasional discomfort with the prominence given to some experiences and perspectives. This points to a wider tension within people's history work: broadening whose experiences are represented can also challenge established expectations about which histories belong within the story of a city.

Preserving the stories

For contributors, recording their experiences had value beyond taking part in the project itself. One storyteller described the importance of having his history **“put down for posterity”**. Others took pride in seeing their own or their family's experiences recorded and publicly recognised.

The publications, website and recorded material gave these histories a form that could remain available beyond the original interviews and activities. PHoL therefore achieved the immediate task of recording and making these histories publicly available; longer-term preservation will depend on arrangements for interview recordings, transcripts, audio and website material.

Connections with museum collections

Leeds Museums and Galleries contributed heritage expertise to story development, with curator research and museum material informing PHoL stories. PHoL material also fed back into museum interpretation, including interview material later used in an exhibition.

The partnership achieved less of the original ambition for participants to engage directly with collections, identify gaps and influence future collecting and interpretation. Staffing and organisational capacity constrained this strand. Material and knowledge did move between PHoL and the museum, but the connection between community heritage and formal collections developed less fully than planned.



Outcome 5: Public engagement in local heritage

PHoL engaged members of the public with Leeds heritage through publications, events, exhibitions, community settings and digital activity. Monitoring data will provide the scale of this engagement, including [insert headline figures for publication distribution, event and exhibition attendance, website use and social media engagement]. Qualitative evidence shows people engaging with both familiar and unfamiliar histories, using the stories to prompt memories and conversations, sharing them with others and identifying further histories they felt should be recorded.

How people engaged with the stories

PHoL connected people with local heritage through recognition as well as discovery. Familiar places and experiences prompted people to place their own lives within the history of Leeds. At one community group, stories and images led into memories of childhood, family life, markets, rationing and earlier Leeds, including memories passed between generations. One reader responded to local nightlife stories with: ***“Those pubs and clubs – I’ve been to them all.”***

Other stories opened up histories people had not known. Audience feedback described some as ***“eye-opening”***, with first-person accounts valued for feeling ***“real”***. One participant who had lived in the same area for more than twenty years had not known about the local Working Men’s Club.

Some audiences moved from reading the stories to identifying what else should be recorded. Community group participants suggested local places, workplaces and aspects of everyday life they wanted to see covered, while some began discussing their own histories and the possibility of experiences like theirs being recorded. A museum volunteer similarly connected the publication with their own past and proposed further histories to explore.

Sharing and using the stories

The publications continued to be used and shared after their initial distribution. People kept copies at home, dipped in and out of them, passed them to friends or family and used them as conversation prompts. Older people’s organisations requested copies for use with members and groups, while one contributor returned to a later event specifically to hear other people’s stories.

Engagement could also prompt further interest in how local heritage was recognised. One person already involved in Leeds heritage learnt through PHoL about the former hostel in Chapel Allerton for children who arrived through the Kindertransport. Despite knowing about Leeds’ Jewish history, the hostel was new to him. He considered whether the site should receive formal recognition through a Civic Trust plaque, although the evaluation did not establish whether this was subsequently pursued.

Live events provided another route for engagement. Launches combined contributors speaking about their experiences with live storytelling, photography, exhibitions and conversation. Citizen journalists described them as active social occasions, with one calling a launch ***“a celebration of our city and our people”***.

Examples of how PHoL stories travelled

Route	Examples from the evaluation
Older people's groups and events	One citizen journalist took copies to an event attended by around 160 older people and felt she could have distributed many more. Copies were also shared through U3A groups and older people's organisations, with some groups requesting further copies for members and activities.
Community organisations and events	Publications were shared through libraries, women's groups, mental health and wellbeing organisations and other community settings. A citizen journalist also presented the Old Sikh Gurdwara story at a community event for blind Asian people.
Heritage and cultural settings	Copies circulated through heritage venues and other cultural activity. One storyteller unexpectedly encountered the publication at a local museum, while another reader linked stories in the booklet with their own memories and contacted the museum with further suggestions.
Personal networks	Storytellers and citizen journalists passed copies to friends and family, some travelled through personal networks beyond the city, including across the UK and to contacts in Canada and Germany
Radio and wider promotion	Citizen journalists spoke about PHoL through Chapel FM and BBC Radio Leeds.
Launches and live events	Launches and later cultural events gave audiences opportunities to hear contributors directly, encounter photography and exhibitions and engage with stories in a live setting. The launch of Volume Two was linked with Leeds 400 celebrations in the city.

What supported and limited public engagement

Engagement was supported by recognisable local hooks, trusted community settings and accessible materials. Goth culture, Leeds United and established community groups provided clear points of connection, while short stories, photographs and free distribution enabled people to engage informally and at their own pace.

Print worked well for many audiences: the booklets were valued as tangible, accessible and easy to share. Feedback also identified scope for audio and other formats, particularly for people less likely to engage through print.

A few participants felt PHoL could have achieved wider awareness across Leeds. They felt greater emphasis had been placed on producing the material than promoting the project more widely, with one describing the focus as on: ***“making it, not on telling people about it”***. Clearer promotion of both the stories and the small, flexible ways people could contribute was suggested as an area for future development.

7. Reflections on how PHoL was delivered

Overall, delivery broadly reflected the Theory of Change. Community relationships, flexible participation, sustained support and taking activity into community settings were central to how people became involved and stories were developed. The museum and intergenerational strands were less fully realised.

Coordination and support

Citizen journalists described a role that involved much more than conducting interviews or writing stories. Developing a piece could involve identifying contributors, making initial approaches, preparing for interviews, using recording equipment, working through transcripts and shaping material for publication. The level of support needed varied with experience and with the demands of individual stories, so initial training was supplemented by ongoing guidance as new situations arose.

Within this, the Project Co-ordinator's role was consistently valued. Citizen journalists highlighted his warmth, listening, flexibility, editorial judgement and ability to put contributors at ease: ***"[The Project Co-ordinator] is so friendly, open and warm... that's his people skills... emotional intelligence."*** Regular one-to-one contact was particularly important in sustaining involvement and helping people work through practical or editorial challenges. One participant described this as ***"keeping people on board and keeping them valued"***.

Support also helped maintain contributor confidence in the process. Consent was built into story-gathering, with contributors told how interviews and photographs might be used and given opportunities to review material before publication. Professional editing, design, photography and production reinforced the sense that contributors and their histories were being taken seriously, while travel expenses and other practical support helped make participation possible.



Going where people are

Community-based story-gathering was a strong feature of PHoL. The Project Co-ordinator met potential storytellers and community contacts through activities they were already involved in, with stories sometimes developing from these encounters rather than through formal recruitment. Citizen journalists worked in similar ways, gathering material in people's homes, community venues, Leeds Market, local businesses, events and other familiar settings.

Leeds Older People's Forum's (LOPF) networks supported this approach. Where the Project Co-ordinator did not already have a route into a community, LOPF could facilitate introductions to neighbourhood organisations, older people's groups and other contacts. Community connectors then provided local knowledge, made introductions, reassured potential contributors and sometimes supported interviews directly. One described her role as: ***"Use me, use me to get in that door."***

In some cases this went beyond making an introduction, with community contacts accompanying the Project Co-ordinator into people's homes or remaining during interviews. This could be particularly important where people were uncertain about taking part or where experiences were sensitive.

The same networks that widened access also influenced which histories came forward. Citizen journalists' interests and contacts, together with relationships already available through LOPF and community organisations, shaped the people and stories most readily identified. Citizen journalists themselves recognised the need for future story-gathering to move beyond established contacts.

Some of PHoL's strongest routes into less-heard stories developed through informal encounters and trusted relationships. One storyteller first encountered the project while taking part in another community heritage activity in Leeds. The Project Co-ordinator heard him speak, approached him afterwards and developed the story through a subsequent interview.

The storyteller valued the space to speak in his own way, the presence of someone he felt comfortable with and the opportunity to review the finished account:

"They left me a lot of space to say what I needed to say... It was good having someone in the room who was also one of us... They sent me back a proof and I made a few suggestions... I thought it was a very good approximation of what we discussed."

A similar process supported the stories of African and Caribbean nurses and midwives. A chance conversation with a community contact led to contributors whose stories had received little public attention. Her existing relationships helped identify people, build confidence in taking part and support the Project Co-ordinator in making those connections.

Participation and flexibility

Participation was flexible enough to accommodate different levels of involvement, interests and personal circumstances. Citizen journalists could follow subjects that interested them, contribute in different ways and step back when personal circumstances, caring responsibilities or other commitments required it. One citizen journalist described how she was able to remain involved during a period of ill health and hospital treatment, with most of her contribution undertaken from home through online interviews. A smaller core remained regularly involved alongside others whose participation changed over time. The atmosphere was described as "laid back", with one participant summarising the approach as: ***"People do as much or as little as they want."***

Routes into PHoL also varied, including previous LOPF activity, community and heritage networks, particular stories or interests, and informal encounters with the project. Writing, research, interviewing, community connections and live activity provided different ways to contribute.

Flexibility also extended to the material itself: shorter personal and family histories that did not fit the main themed chapters were brought together in a separate A Leeds Life section of the publication.

Some forms of participation were nevertheless demanding. Longer interviews and substantial writing could be tiring, with one citizen journalist describing an intensive interview as leaving her ***“totally wrung out”***.

Partner capacity affected some planned activity. Leeds Museums and Galleries supported story development and provided heritage expertise and access to collections, but staffing, funding and organisational pressures reduced the scope for the more sustained involvement initially envisaged. Plans had included participants working more directly with collections, identifying gaps, potentially influencing what the museum collected and how Leeds was represented, and developing exhibition or other museum activity. These ambitions were only partly realised.

Co-production and shared influence

Co-production was most evident in developing stories. Citizen journalists’ interests and knowledge shaped subjects, contributors, research and interviews, while community partners opened routes into different communities and helped identify stories that might otherwise have been missed. Citizen journalists also contributed to the project’s visual identity and website.

As the delivery process became more established, the balance between collective discussion and progressing the work shifted. Volume One involved more shared learning while approaches to identifying contributors, consent, interviewing, editing and production were worked through. By Volume Two, some participants felt fewer meetings were needed because they were more familiar with the process, while one missed the additional opportunities for discussion and involvement. One participant also questioned whether all learning from the first volume had carried forward.

As stories moved towards publication, the delivery team took a greater editorial role. Some storytellers reviewed and amended their final text. One citizen journalist noted substantial changes between the material she submitted and the finished piece, while recognising the need for strong editing. Another would have welcomed more collective discussion about story selection and greater space for quieter members to contribute ideas.



8. Legacy and sustainability

PHoL has established a strong basis for continued activity beyond the funded period. Citizen journalists intend to continue developing stories and are exploring funding opportunities, while storytellers and community partners have continued to share, promote and build on the work. The publications, website and relationships developed through PHoL also provide resources for continued community-history activity.

Continuing to develop and share stories

Skills and experience accumulated through Shine magazine and the two PHoL publications are being carried into further writing, story-gathering and heritage activity. Citizen journalists were already discussing new stories, events, different formats, work with schools and academic links, and were confident that their involvement would continue. One citizen journalist also saw potential for those involved in gathering stories to pass these skills on to others, building wider capacity to record Leeds' histories. Funding avenues are being explored to support a further phase.

There is similar potential among storytellers. Some returned to later events, shared publications through their own networks and remained interested in other people's histories. One storyteller identified further LGBTQ+ and trans histories that he felt should be recorded and said he would be willing to volunteer and contribute again. Another continued from storyteller to audience member, distributor and advocate, requesting further copies and promoting PHoL independently through community and professional networks.

The Project Co-ordinator was also clear about the intention to continue and develop PHoL, with the evaluation intended to support the next stage of the work. The evidence of continued involvement is strongest among the older citizen journalists and storytellers; the more limited intergenerational strand provides less evidence about longer-term involvement among younger participants.

Heritage remaining accessible and in circulation

The heritage gathered through PHoL continues to be used and shared. Older people's services have requested further copies of the publications for members and groups, while continuing demand meant that Volume One was no longer available. Copies have travelled through community, professional, personal and heritage networks within and beyond Leeds, including through participants themselves.

The website keeps stories available beyond the printed publications and provides space for longer material and audio. Citizen journalists saw value in its permanence and in retaining material that could not be accommodated in the books. There was less clarity about its longer-term role, including whether it will function primarily as an archive, publishing platform or route for continuing story collection.

A significant development towards the end of the project was a partnership with Leeds 400, which marks the 400th anniversary of Leeds receiving its charter as a royal borough. Leeds City Council's Culture Team is responsible for Leeds 400. The second book and Volume Two launch event in July incorporated Leeds 400 as part of the celebrations. There was a strong alignment between the Leeds 400 programme and PHoL's aim of celebrating the diverse histories and experiences of people across the city. This connection was important to contribute to the city's celebrations and ensure that the perspectives and experiences represented through our project were part of the wider conversation about Leeds and its history. The West Yorkshire Archive Service was invited to bring a copy of the historic charter to the launch. PHoL also worked with a poet from the Caribbean community in Chapeltown, introduced through the Leeds 400 team, who performed a poem reflecting on the significance of Leeds to her and her community.

Council representatives attended the Volume 2 launch event and saw first-hand the project's ability to bring together people from different backgrounds and tell a diverse range of stories about Leeds. As a result, copies of the book were provided to all of the 99 Leeds City Councillors, following a request from the Council. The Council's international team also expressed its intention to provide copies of A People's History of Leeds to international visitors as a way of introducing them to the city's history and the diversity of its communities.

PHoL is also contributing to wider conversations about how Leeds tells and presents its own history. Through discussions with cultural and heritage organisations, including Leeds Museums and Galleries and other partners, the Project Co-ordinator has identified a shared interest in developing a stronger and more unified way of communicating the story of the city. A heritage framework is currently being developed, and PHoL was involved in discussions about how the people's history represented through this project can contribute to this work. Stories from the website have already been used by partner organisations within their reporting and promotional activity.

This represents an important development for the project: PHoL is increasingly being recognised as providing a distinctive community voice within the wider heritage landscape of Leeds. The project is therefore not only creating books, stories and digital content, but is contributing to longer-term partnerships and conversations about how the history and identity of Leeds are represented.

Community and organisational legacy

Some of the strongest legacy lies in relationships that have continued beyond individual stories. Community partners have circulated publications, generated further contacts and used PHoL material within their own activity. Connections developed through the stories of African and Caribbean healthcare workers continued through relationships with Leeds Black Elders and later cultural activity at Leeds Playhouse.

People, stories, knowledge and skills have also continued to move between PHoL, museum activity and wider community-history work. The more formal museum ambitions around collections developed less fully during the funded project, but PHoL has become part of a wider network of community heritage activity in Leeds. One heritage stakeholder described the longer-term potential as:

“Ideally, the project becomes like a culture. It becomes things that people do, even when there isn't a booklet. People are like, ‘Actually, my story is important. I need to find a way to preserve it or share it or record it’... It's part of a scene now.”

LOPF is also carrying relationships, experience and learning from PHoL into future activity. The original legacy plans included continued story-gathering and volunteering opportunities, links with wider arts and heritage activity, an enduring online archive, and using PHoL learning and contacts in future work. Further routes for citizen journalists are developing alongside the search for future funding.

9. Key learning and implications for future delivery

The stories created value beyond preservation

PHoL preserved less-visible histories while also creating opportunities for people to encounter, discuss and respond to them. Stories prompted memories and conversation, introduced people to unfamiliar experiences and sometimes encouraged audiences to identify histories of their own. Personal stories were valued for creating empathy, challenging assumptions and connecting past experience with present-day rights, inequalities and social change. Bringing different lives together also created a shared account of Leeds while retaining their distinctiveness. An unexpected finding was the potential of familiar places, images and lived experiences to prompt reminiscence and conversation, including for people experiencing cognitive impairment.

Future value lies both in recording further histories and making greater use of those already gathered. Different formats, events and community activity can extend how stories are encountered and generate further contributions. Recording everyday life as the city changes also allows the heritage record to continue developing.

Widening the heritage record depends on widening the relationships around the project

Community relationships were central to reaching contributors and developing stories. Working through existing groups, contacts and settings enabled stories to emerge through everyday community activity. Participation also depended on people recognising that their experiences belonged within the project and having a trusted route into it. These relationships also shaped whose histories were most readily identified. Existing networks produced rich material, but citizen journalists recognised the need to extend beyond their own contacts and interests. Wider reach alone will not necessarily broaden representation. Audience feedback also showed that wider representation can prompt different views about which stories should be included and how Leeds' heritage is balanced.

Representation also concerns the kinds of experience recognised as heritage. Future work can extend further into histories that have been less visible, stigmatised or difficult to discuss, while giving communities and audiences greater opportunities to identify what is missing and what should be recorded. As the range of histories broadens, clear editorial principles will also be important for handling sensitive or discriminatory testimony.



Flexible participation depended on active support and shared structure

Flexible participation enabled people to contribute according to their interests, skills and circumstances. Regular individual support, editorial guidance, clear outputs and active coordination helped turn that involvement into completed stories and publications. As delivery became more established, the balance between efficiency and collective involvement shifted. Some participants felt fewer meetings were needed once they were familiar with the process, while one missed the additional opportunities for discussion and involvement. Future delivery should retain flexibility alongside enough shared space for learning, co-production and manageable workloads.

Delivery plans also need to be revisited when activity begins. Staffing, organisational capacity and participant groups can change between project design and implementation, particularly where there is a long funding lead-in.

Intergenerational work was stronger where shared purpose came first

The strongest intergenerational activity developed around a subject with relevance across generations. Feedback on the more structured strand indicated that the group and its support needs had changed by the time delivery began; young people themselves were not interviewed, so their own experience was not captured.

Future work should begin with the people involved and a shared point of interest, allowing relationships and activity to develop together. Younger people's experiences of Leeds today can form part of the heritage itself, creating a more reciprocal exchange between generations. It's important to ensure that dedicated youth worker time is included in the budget to enable them to devote the necessary time and energy into involving and supporting young people.

The approach is transferable when adapted to place

Citizen journalists saw potential to share the approach with schools, universities, the local authority and people undertaking similar work elsewhere. The transferable elements are locally grounded story-gathering, flexible participation, trusted relationships and high-quality presentation. Together, these enable people and communities to identify, record and curate histories they consider important. Any future application will need to develop from the relationships, histories and communities of the place concerned.



