

Feeling Towns: Pride and Herefordshire

Partner Report for Rural Media

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Executive Summary

The *Feeling Towns* project, in collaboration with Rural Media, explored what pride in place meant to Herefordshire. Research was undertaken across summer 2022 and used a variety of qualitative research methods, including semi-structured interviews and workshops. We focused on what the notion of civic pride means for young people and on understanding the relationship between volunteering and pride in place.

On Volunteering

Volunteer motivation is generational: young people volunteer to learn skills and receive training; older people volunteer to build networks, to continue to develop, and to use their existing skills. Volunteers can be motivated by a commitment to the activity in question or because they have feelings of place attachment. But motivations vary, and pride and place-attachment are themselves complex: they emerge not from long-standing relationships with a place but from people's sense of autonomy. These motivations can contain internal tensions: the appreciation of green spaces vs. the need for new developments; the inclusion of newcomers vs. the effects on established communities.

Recommendations: We suggest differentiating ways of targeting volunteers according to age and activity; we suggest ensuring volunteers have a sense of ownership and engagement over activities; we suggest training on diversity and inclusion to ensure that the aspirations of the activity match the realities.

On Young People

Notions of "civic pride" and "pride in place" were not readily understood. However, the idea of "local pride" elicited often personal stories, narrating Herefordshire as a "sanctuary" and as a "kind" place where people "step in". At the same time, young people understood Herefordshire as poorly connected, which left them feeling isolated; that Hereford is an "underdog" city; and that the south of the city is stigmatised for being on the social, cultural and economic margins. *Heavy is the Head* addressed many of those issues and barriers, providing an opportunity for Herefordshire's young people to "socialise through creativity" and to consider their own responsibilities in relation to place and community. It did so in a way that visibly celebrated the young people, their differences, and their concerns.

Recommendations: There is an urgent need for safe, future-proof, accessible and appropriately supervised spaces for young people in Herefordshire. We suggest that a young people's advocacy role be instituted that brings together key stakeholders and develops a long-term strategy to support spaces and activities for young people.

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Introduction

[*Feeling Towns*](#) is an Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) funded knowledge exchange project led by the University of Southampton. It explores the role of place and

identity in governance and local policy, paying close attention to the government’s [Levelling Up](#) agenda, which identified “restoring pride in place” as one of its 12 guiding missions. We have brought together a community of practice from a range of sectors, communities and geographies to share knowledge and expertise to better understand the correlation between pride and place attachment—understood as the emotional bonds developed between people and place—and the health of local cultural ecologies. The project has four wider aims:

1. **To explore** collective methods and metrics for understanding pride
2. **To share** qualitative methods that challenge dominant econometric approaches to understanding the impacts of investment in culture and regeneration
3. **To cooperate** across multiple political and policy realms engaged in the Levelling Up agenda, sharing findings and influencing policy making
4. **To produce** new understandings of the complex roles that pride, place attachment and civic engagement play in local decision making

With our partners from Darlington Borough Council, Southampton City Council, Rural Media in Herefordshire, and Historic England, we developed a co-produced approach to address the specific needs of each organisation and place. We have conducted fieldwork and developed our creative methodologies with the communities who live, work and volunteer in these places.

Levelling Up was the flagship policy of Boris Johnson’s post-Brexit UK government. It aimed to spread opportunity and prosperity to all regions of the UK, addressing regional imbalances in social mobility and people’s life chances. [Some evidence](#) suggests that the allocation of funds has not matched the government rhetoric, and the future of Levelling Up in the current political climate is uncertain.

The purpose of this report is threefold: i. to articulate the specific challenges in Herefordshire that relate to identifying and measuring “pride in place”; ii. to summarise the project’s activities in Herefordshire; iii. to present key themes, findings and recommendations.

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Challenges for Herefordshire

Herefordshire has significant pockets of severe need and deprivation that require—in the language of the political moment—levelling up. Figures released by the Office for National Statistics (ONS), show that in Herefordshire, [34.6% of households are deprived](#) of at least one dimension pertaining to education, employment, health or housing. As well as the differences between towns in Herefordshire, there are also divides within areas. Hereford, for example, contains multiple levels of inequality across the city. [Challenges](#) across the county include rural deprivation, digital exclusion, poor connectivity, and few opportunities for young people. The Stronger Hereford Board succeeded in obtaining money from the 2021 Towns Fund with proposals that sought to [“to improve perceptions of Hereford \[...\] for visitors and to instil pride of place for residents”](#). Pride is thus a key measure of success for the proposed regeneration projects and the board’s wider ambitions to improve the lives of residents across Herefordshire. There is a relatively high amount of activity in the county, driven by established cultural and community-led organisations, which makes Hereford a dynamic site for this kind of work.

Our partners wished to consider specific aspects of pride. First, there was a desire to understand the drivers of local volunteering and how volunteering skills and capacities might be shared among stakeholder organisations as well as the volunteers themselves. Second, it was important to develop a greater understanding of the relationship between cultural and civic engagement among young people. Our fieldwork, over the summer of 2022, coincided with the annual Ledbury Poetry Festival (LPF), with whom we were able to develop a programme of research activities that incorporated our innovative creative methods. LPF is integral to Herefordshire's cultural programme. The festival, founded in 1996, with the first annual event held the following year, is a [National Portfolio Organisation \(NPO\)](#) that has exposure and reach across the country. It has recently received [increased funding from Arts Council England](#) to renovate the town's Barrett Browning Institute and to develop a county-wide volunteering scheme.

Responding to these developments, we sought to explore the following research questions:

1. **Why do people volunteer in Herefordshire?**
2. **How do young people in Herefordshire understand pride in place?**
3. **How do young people in Herefordshire understand civic engagement?**

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Research Methods

To address the question of volunteering we held a **creatively facilitated workshop** and we conducted a semi-structured interview with a representative of a key cultural organisation. The workshop took place during the Ledbury Poetry Festival (and included participants aged between 18–70) and the interview, a conversation with a volunteer with a senior position in Hereford's Three Choirs, took place as an online meeting. Both sought to understand the connection between place, pride and volunteering.

To address the questions about young people's pride in place and civic engagement, we attended *Heavy is the Head that Wears the Crown*, a **creative response project** to the Queen's Platinum Jubilee in 2022 led by the artist Toni Cook. Working with young people aged 11–16, young adults aged 16–23, and adults with learning disabilities across Herefordshire from a range of organisations, the project explored young people's attitudes to responsibility through creative methods including poetry, portrait and statements, drama and visual art. Their resulting work was shared at community events and venues, culminating in a performance and exhibition at Ledbury Poetry Festival.

The *Feeling Towns* team subsequently held a **follow-up workshop** at [Close House](#) in Hereford with Toni Cook and 9 young people who participated in the project. It investigated:

- i. how young people in Herefordshire understand pride in place
- ii. how *Heavy is the Head* had influenced the young people's experiences of pride in place and civic engagement

The research team finally conducted a **focus group evaluation** of *Heavy is the Head* involving the project's creative team and commissioning group.

According to our research questions, we have divided the next part of our report into two key strands: **i. Volunteering**, with analysis derived from our interview and workshop at Ledbury Poetry Festival; and **ii. Young People, Pride in Place and Civic Engagement**, with

analysis derived from *Heavy is the Head*, the follow-up workshop, and the focus group evaluation. We offer key themes, findings and recommendations for both of these strands.

There exist often difficult, sometimes competing, questions about Herefordshire's identity, culture, topography, economy, health outcomes and social disparities. It may be the case that levelling up within Herefordshire is more pertinent than enhancing the county's relative status within the country. Taking this into account:

- i. Our findings seek **to inform the Stronger Towns Fund Evaluation and Monitoring framework** before the delivery phase begins
- ii. We aim **to support the Herefordshire Cultural Partnership** with our findings about volunteering and young people's pride in place and civic engagement
- iii. Specifically, we aim **to contribute to Ledbury Poetry Festival's volunteering project, Creative Pathways**, and other volunteering opportunities in Herefordshire

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Key Themes and Findings: Volunteering

- **Pride in Place:** Findings from Ledbury Poetry Festival and the Three Choirs Festival demonstrated notable differences. Pride in place was much more significant for volunteers in Ledbury than for those associated with the Three Choirs Festival. Three Choirs operates a regional rotation and the focus is clearly on the uniqueness of the shared cultural event rather than on place or identity. The workshop in the poetry festival, however, suggested that the transformation of the place itself was key to both the Festival and their support of it. Volunteers were proud of the international reputation of the Festival—and of the presence of the Festival on the high street and the “increased signage” in the town and at the train station (Interview, 2022). This finding chimed with other sources of pride that were predicated on **being recognised by others**, such as the fact that Ledbury's high street had been featured in a national broadsheet newspaper, The Guardian, as one of the [best places in the world for Christmas shopping](#). There was a cross-generational consensus—from both Festivals—that place attachment did *not* depend upon whether you came from a place or how long you lived in a place. Rather, it depends on how **much you wanted to be in a place and the sense of community you could have in that place**.

'Festival volunteers are committed, proud, passionate about what it means for Ledbury'

'Folks from all over, all sorts of different reasons, to learn, to give, to share, to belong'

'New faces, who are they? Who are they visiting? Welcome to places no longer visited or forgotten'

'Reminds me how much I love this place, formed me, informed me'

'The swifts are here – anchoring summer to the sky – screaming the “festival is coming”. They divebomb the clocktower shouting “here it is, here it is.”'

- **Tensions around place:** The workshop in Ledbury poetry festival also suggested that a celebration of diversity was checked by anxieties about the realities of inclusion (in terms of diversity and age), about the effects on the larger town (in terms

of class). These considerations led to a discussion about the tensions within the community: housing developments on green spaces, for example, were regarded with anxiety and there was a fear that young people would bring disruptive and antisocial behaviour—although the fear didn't, they note, match the reality, which was tame. According to recent [crime statistics](#), Ledbury has lower rates of anti-social behaviour and overall crime than the Herefordshire average, although there have been [recent reported instances](#) of anti-social behaviour in the town.

'Lacking, however, in the young, in diversity'

'Newcomers, old timers, the wary, the confident, the shy'

'I am proud to welcome people into Ledbury but I get the sense that some people who live here don't feel welcome'

'Who cleans up after us when we party?'

- **Pride and volunteering:** Young people were less well-represented in the group but volunteered for different reasons: to gain skills and experience for the job market—a very specific problem, as learning opportunities in the cultural and heritage sector for young people in the region are few and far between. They were not particularly motivated by a sense of place. Older volunteers gave their time to the poetry festival because they liked having their skills and contributions valued, they liked the social network, and they liked having a sense of “ownership” of the Festival and of Ledbury: “Retirement can be a huge space to fill where new friends can be found” (Interview, 2022).

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Recommendations: Volunteering

We suggest **differentiating ways of targeting volunteers according to age and activity**. For Three Choirs, the music was important to volunteers. For Ledbury Poetry Festival, the sense of place, the validation of skills, and the offer of community, particularly for older volunteers, was most valued. For the younger volunteers at the Festival, the development of skills and networks for the job market was crucial. In rural locations, internship opportunities are less common.

The sense of place is important for some volunteers but is **attached to agency rather than to longevity**. People want to be in a place and feel as if ownership of some kind is available. This point is more important to them than how long someone has lived in a place or the nature of their connections to that place.

There is a tension, sometimes self-conscious and sometimes not, between the inclusive language attached to volunteering for cultural events and the challenges that inclusion and diversity actually involve, especially in rural communities, where issues around class and age are clearly being played out. **Regional training and mentoring is valuable** in these contexts.

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Key Themes and Findings: Young people, pride in place and civic engagement

Pride in Place:

- For some of the younger participants (aged 9–12), “pride in place” was a somewhat alien concept. Even when it was explained in detail and with examples, some from this age group were unable to connect the idea to their lived experience. *Civic* pride was particularly confusing, with the word “civic” unknown to some of them.
 - More generally, “pride” among this younger group was understood as being happy with their achievements or being associated with something outside of themselves (e.g., a club, an activity, or social group—see below). There was some discussion among this younger group that expressing pride was embarrassing and that accepting a compliment was “egotistical” and needed to be played down.
- All of the young people who attend Close House and who were involved with *Heavy is the Head*, expressed pride in being an “EPIC”, (“Energetic, Positive, Informed, and Creative”). Such pride was related to Close House being a safe space for socialising and friendship through shared hobbies and interests with others “like them”. The project also helped young people to find a sense of confidence in being themselves.
 - The concept of *acceptance* arose frequently—and that Close House (and other organisations such as [The Cracked Slipper Company](#)) “accepted anyone”, regardless of gender, race, sexuality, ability and background (Young Person Interview, 2022).
- The youngest group *did* grasp the concept of “local”—which was understood as their very immediate surroundings and included their families. Given the earlier lack of understanding and connection, discussing “local pride” elicited some surprisingly personal and heartfelt responses. One young person said that they were “proud of their nan for getting through life” (Interview, 2022) and they reflected on their family’s association through the generations to specific local buildings and organisations.
 - When prompted to think of how it might feel to come from other places—such as Birmingham, Manchester or London—the young people immediately questioned which *part* of the city, as “it would depend which part you came from, wouldn’t it?” (Interview, 2022). These responses suggest the young people we spoke with understand the localness of place-based pride and of the intimate relationship between “local” and family. This specific relationship was understood as a key element of their emerging identities.
- Indeed, participants of all ages—though more so from the older group—understood that there are stereotypes about Herefordshire and Herefordians and that these can be stigmatising. For example, the “Southside” of the city (i.e. south of the river), is where the “chavs” live and there is an expectation of certain clothing and behaviour choices from both within and outside of the Southside community.
 - That Southside is peripheral to Hereford’s more dominant middle class, who largely reside north of the river, was made clear: “Living in the south is a bad thing”, and there are “druggies” on bikes, using the old railway lines—“the lines”—as a trade route (Interviews, 2022). This area is poorly lit and an

intimidating space for women and girls. There have been a number of sexual attacks there recently.

- For the youngest participants, Hereford was understood somewhat negatively: “Nothing’s been done in Hereford” and “there’s nothing to say about being from Hereford” were typical responses. For one respondent, “Pride has to have something positive...there’s been a lot of bad news about the area where I live lately” (Interview, 2022).
- For the older participants, Herefordshire was a place where “people stepped in” and looked after others. That Hereford is a [City of Sanctuary](#) is a source of pride and there was discussion of the city being welcoming to Syrian and Ukrainian refugees. Hereford is “kind” (Interview, 2022).

Civic Engagement:

- *Heavy is the Head* created opportunities for young people from different parts of the county to meet each other outside of their usual locale. For some, this meant visiting parts of Herefordshire for the first time, even if they lived the next town along. Both young people and the organisers understood Hereford meeting Ledbury—separated by a 30-minute car ride or 17-minute train journey—as a key success of the project, indicating the levels of isolation of some young people in these communities.
 - Key to this point, according to one of the youth workers involved in the project, was that HITH offered the opportunity to “socialise through creativity”. Indeed, “isolation” and related synonyms were mentioned several times across our visits and conversations.
- At the same time, the young people experienced pride through their achievements being celebrated in other ways. Some of the young people reported feeling surprised by the pride and sense of achievement they felt after performing at a care home for the elderly. All the young people said that they would like to do similar projects again and some of them were already involved with projects and organisations that had become known to them through HITH.

Further findings from the online focus group evaluation with the HITH commissioning group and delivery partners include:

- There is an anxiety that further cuts to the arts, local government and youth services will result in more competitive funding schemes. Such types of funding will result in organisations and individuals being unable to plan long term, structured, developmental programmes. This state of “insecure project by insecure project” (Interview, 2022) has a detrimental impact on young people as “end users” and on the organisations as service providers.
 - For the young people, the lack of continuity makes it difficult to sustain friendships and build trust, embedding the sense of Hereford as an isolated and *isolating* place. For some young people, this offers a reason to seek employment and a life away from Herefordshire when they are old enough.

For the organisations, it results in bidding and evaluation fatigue as the *Feeling Towns* team has discussed in "[Towns and the Cultural Economies of Recovery \(TCER\): A Multidisciplinary Mapping](#)" (2022).

- Questions were raised about how pride in place was to be measured: if it is to be achieved by proxies, how will these proxies be weighted? One participant noted that it is much easier to evidence and measure instances of anti-social behaviour than cultural engagement. Following this logic, how does one "unit" of cultural engagement equate to one instance of anti-social behaviour?
- Related to this point, there is suspicion and resistance from some local organisations about the value of measuring pride. This view is partly due to an inherent dislike of evaluation processes, which can be time-consuming and stretch already limited resources (Interview, 2022). But it is also due to a weakly articulated rationale from the government about why pride should be measured in the first place.
 - Additionally, there remains an anxiety that qualitative reporting is less valued by funders than quantitative data, and that the difficult work of eliciting and reporting qualitative case studies for the most impact may not be time well spent. Though the participants we spoke with recognised the value of qualitative data, they were sanguine about meeting funders' demands for quantitative data.
- When it is sourced and reported, data—especially qualitative but also quantitative—is often siloed within individual organisations. Knowledge about existing reports relies on relationships and, thus, it is not effectively promoted or shared.

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Recommendations: Young people, pride in place and civic engagement

This research took place at a time of growing local unease about the visibility of young people in public spaces. There is a perceived rise of "boredom crimes", such as petty crime and antisocial behaviour. In the public imagination, this behaviour is linked to underpolicing and a lack of trained youth workers. Many of the young people we spoke with were aware of these negative and very generalised perceptions, and specifically they were aware that some people consider their presence unwelcome in public spaces. Local decision-makers acknowledge it is key that towns retain young people, particularly those in their late teens and early twenties. **Offering new and improved local opportunities for young people in the area**, as well as **increasing their senses of local pride**, are key to this challenge.

There is an urgent need for safe, future-proof, accessible and appropriately supervised spaces for young people in Herefordshire. The [recent OFSTED report](#) on Herefordshire Council's children services is an opportune moment to open a debate on wider provisions and the needs of older children and young adults. This provision might work on the model of Close House, which has clear, positive benefits on young people's sense of pride. This recommendation should be understood as **a long-term investment and process, not on a project-by-project basis**. Establishing continuity for young people is important as it gives them the opportunity to learn from their mistakes, to build trust in themselves and others, and to make incremental developments in their skills and training. **Increasing pride among young people in Herefordshire is essential to retaining young people.**

A young people’s advocacy role might be instituted in Herefordshire that brings together key stakeholders and develops a long-term strategy. One of their key tasks might be to advocate for funding and partnerships, such as HITH, in support of future projects. This person could increase the recognition of the specialist skills and embodied knowledge of trained youth, arts and community development workers, which is often lost when individuals are no longer in post. A further cause would be to encourage funders to make their application processes and criteria more flexible to account for community-led practices that are **process-oriented rather than goal-oriented**.

Stakeholders might develop a “City of Kindness” strategy, which includes a set of actionable policies across local government departments, businesses, culture groups and third sector organisations. Such initiatives are gaining momentum in [several US cities](#). Such a strategy could build on the young people’s positive expressions of local pride and promote Herefordshire’s culture of environmentalism and the sanctuary status of its main city. Such a strategy might contribute to retaining young people and enable the county to become a draw for others to settle. Similarly, stakeholders might consider developing other “visions” or “missions” on pride in place. Can the Herefordshire Culture Consortium develop a “civic vision”? Is there a volunteer charter?

A local data observatory can help to collect and share data. It must be accessible, easy to contact and open to the community. We suggest a joint bid to fund a pilot case study page for an Observatory website, which would bring together narratives and histories of Herefordshire and its towns to complement the existing quantitative datasets. We further endorse the creation of a report depository that allows local residents, organisations and stakeholders to network and discuss challenges in the towns across the county. This work will help to make long-term data available and useful for Councils and stakeholders.

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APPENDIX

The Feeling Towns team would like to thank everyone who has contributed to this report:

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All Ledbury volunteers, performers and attendees who spoke with us at Ledbury Poetry Festival (07–12/07/2022), the participants of the poetry workshop (08/07/2022), and all Herefordshire participants at Close House

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