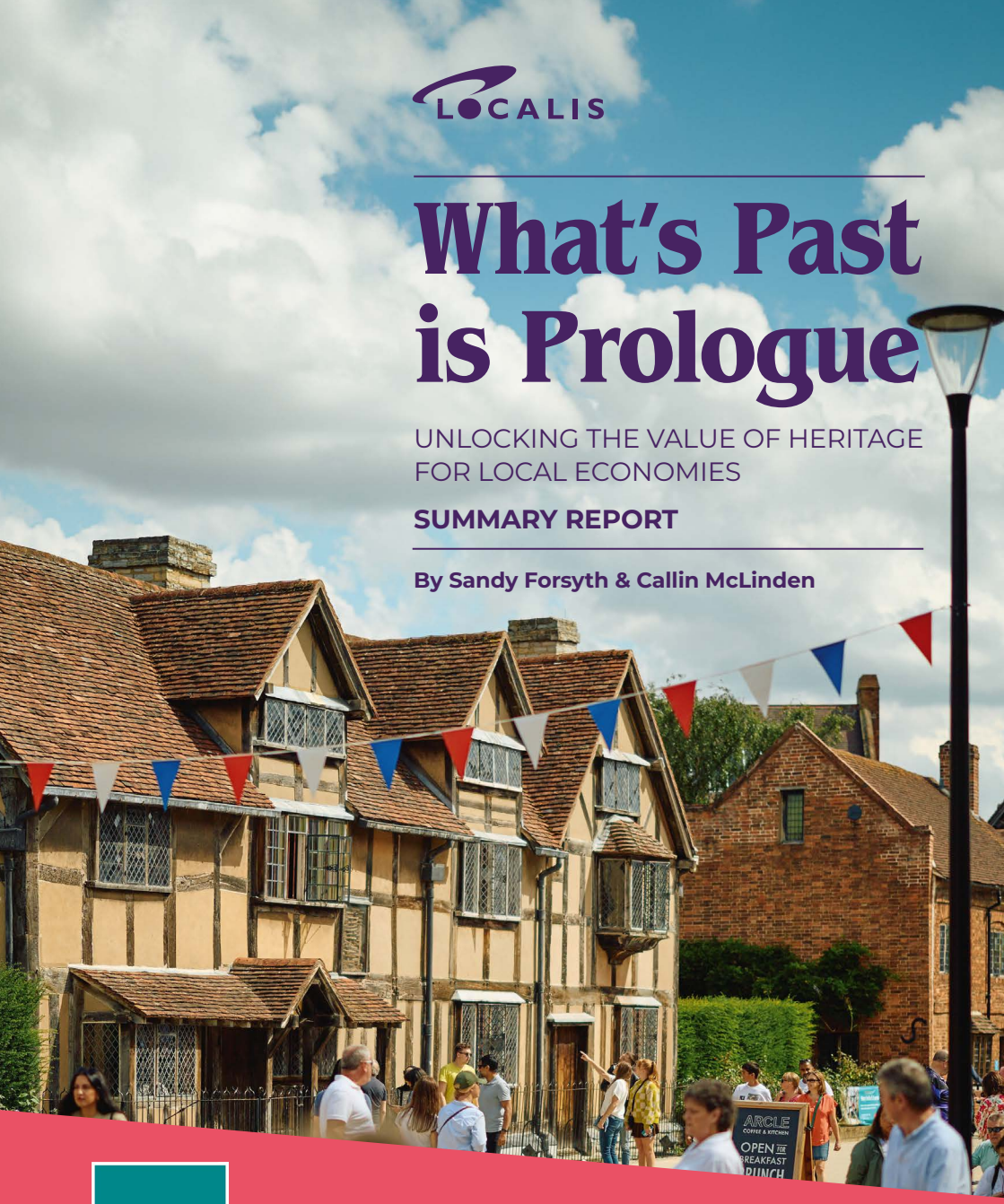
LOCALIS

What's Past is Prologue

UNLOCKING THE VALUE OF HERITAGE FOR LOCAL ECONOMIES

SUMMARY REPORT

By Sandy Forsyth & Callin McLinden



STRATFORD-ON-AVON DISTRICT COUNCIL

Shakespeare birthplace trust

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Acknowledgements

Localis is a leading, independent think tank that was established in 2001. Its work promotes neo-localist ideas through research, events and commentary, covering a range of local and national domestic policy issues.

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Any opinions expressed in the report remain the authors own, as do any errors or omissions.

Research Participants

This report was made possible by the generous contribution of time and expertise from a range of local and national experts, practitioners and stakeholders. A full list of research participants can be found in the full report along with all the reference sources.

The full report can be found at: https://www.localis.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2026/07/Localis-Whats-Past-is-Prologue-A5-Report-July2026-PRF01a.pdf

Foreword

Stratford-upon-Avon is blessed with a rich heritage. As the birthplace of William Shakespeare, Stratford has an international reputation and attracts significant visitor numbers every year. Stratford's resident population is relatively small, but, by opening its arms to the annual flow of visitors, Stratford can sustain a vibrant town centre, blue and green open spaces and a cultural and heritage offer more often associated with much larger towns.

Year on year, visitors are becoming more demanding and better informed, and the cultural tourism sector is increasingly crowded as destinations compete for visitor attention. Set against these factors, it is vital that Stratford keeps up with expectations to ensure that it maintains its prominent position within the heritage economy.

A well-presented, coherent heritage offer has enormous potential to achieve good things. It can enhance the health and wellbeing of those who immerse themselves within it, provide fulfilment and employment, create a sense of 'pride in place' among residents, and underpin a strong local economy.

At their best, heritage assets are accessible and inclusive, allowing all sectors of society to engage with them at a level at which they are comfortable. Whilst there will inevitably be competition between heritage assets, from a place perspective, they should seek to complement each other, combining to give the consumer the best possible experience. This will make visitors more receptive to the offer, more relaxed and more open to a longer stay in the setting.

As Stratford embarks on the next stage of its heritage journey, this independent research has been commissioned to provide a framework around which great ideas can be developed. It provides a baseline that can be used to underpin evidence-based decisions that will ensure a progressive Stratford thrives for current and future generations.

Tony Perks, Deputy Chief Executive
Stratford-on-Avon District Council

Introduction

'What's Past is Prologue' invites us to imagine a future in which heritage is valued as more than the preservation of buildings and the curation of stories.

This thoughtful exploration by Localis encourages us to see heritage as both a strategic asset and a form of enabling infrastructure: one that can drive economic growth while also strengthening wellbeing, social prosperity and a shared pride in place. This is heritage in action in its truest sense, weaving together past, present and future in ways which bring real opportunity for people and communities.

Seen in this way, the report makes a powerful argument for change in the policy and funding landscape for heritage. It calls for longer-term investment in stewardship, skills and regeneration, with heritage made visible within growth plans, local plans and cultural strategies from the outset.

Using Stratford-upon-Avon as a case study, the report positions heritage as part of a wider 'civic infrastructure', and, crucially, one which enables communities to shape their own narratives. The value of real, embedded community participation is something those of us working in heritage have known and felt for a long time, but it is important to see it set out as a necessary imperative, rather than a tokenistic nice-to-have.

The Shakespeare Birthplace Trust is the home of Shakespeare for the world, a charity established by Act of Parliament with a national custodial role for the built heritage and collections that situate William Shakespeare's work, life and legacies in Stratford-upon-Avon. Our global significance is intrinsically linked to a local, place-based story.

It is at this meeting point of people and place that heritage can operate so powerfully, but this is not passive transfer of value. Heritage must be actively and thoughtfully stewarded and interpreted, made real and accessible for everyone in dynamic ways, and this requires leadership.

If we are to make the case – as we must – for investment, we must rigorously and credibly evidence the holistic value of heritage as a central part of a growth and wellbeing strategy.

The real task is one of alignment; working in partnership nationally, regionally and locally to organise, retain and grow the value of our heritage assets. That way we will ensure what's past really is prologue to an ambitious, shared future.

Rachael North, Chief Executive
The Shakespeare Birthplace Trust

Summary of Recommendations

Tier of governance	Recommendations
Central government	Make tangible and intangible heritage visible across national place policy
	Publish heritage-specific appraisal guidance for place-based investment
	Put heritage funding on a more sustainable footing
	Rebuild specialist heritage capacity across local government
Regional government and strategic authorities	Make heritage a defined part of Local Growth Plans and investment evidence bases
	Build heritage skills into regional labour market and green skills planning
	Use destination management to measure heritage value, not just visitor numbers
	Actively shape regional heritage and retrofit supply chains
Local councils	Move from Local Plan recognition towards delivery-focused heritage planning
	Use council-owned heritage assets to support long-term stewardship
	Apply procurement reforms to heritage-led regeneration projects
	Strengthen community stewardship, inclusion and heritage literacy through holistic project governance

Executive Summary

This report seeks to reframe heritage in policy as a strategic mechanism for inclusive and sustainable placemaking – a form of strategic infrastructure that connects the past, present, and future. Heritage is not merely a backdrop to growth but is a powerful asset for productivity, wellbeing, and social prosperity. Using the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust (the Trust) in Stratford-upon-Avon as a primary case study, this report will make clear that the management of both tangible properties and intangible legacies is a process that shapes local identity and that actively contributes to an inclusive, sustainable environment for growth. However, contemporary pressures such as post-pandemic visitor declines, inflation, and the cost-of-living crisis mean that heritage-led development must rise to the challenge of creating a more coherent place offer. The Trust, alongside the town of Stratford-upon-Avon, is currently undergoing a process of transition that could demonstrate how heritage investment can strengthen long-term economic resilience while fostering collaboration between councils, partners, and communities. In a national policy environment that increasingly values holistic approaches to place, there has never been a better time to cement heritage as an integral part of the conversation surrounding strategic planning and place-based growth.

Defining heritage as civic infrastructure

Heritage should not be considered as a static, retrospective relic of the past: it is a dynamic, present-day process that shapes place identity and influences future investment. Nor is it a single, bounded industry; rather, it is itself a place-based economic system. It encompasses both tangible assets (historic buildings, landscapes, and archives) and intangible practices (skills, stories, and traditions) to form connective tissue that links communities together. Increasingly, heritage has been integrated into the national policy agenda as part of the social, economic, and civic infrastructure of place rather than merely as a set of visitor attractions or matters of cultural stewardship. While its economic benefits are clear, heritage also sits within a national policy shift towards preventative and place-based intervention. There has therefore perhaps never been a clearer case for investment in heritage. Interventions such as the Treasury Green Book's emphasis on non-market benefits such as wellbeing and pride-in-place have necessitated better measurement of heritage's holistic value and DCMS's Culture and Heritage Capital Framework further exemplifies a policy shift towards new, more holistic approaches to heritage.

" Heritage should not be considered as a static retrospective relic of the past: it is a dynamic, present-day process that shapes place identity and influences future investment."



For every £1 of direct GVA by the heritage sector, an additional £1.93 is supported in the wider economy through supply chains and employee spending



The annual GVA of England's heritage sector is estimated at £15.32bn, slightly exceeding the domestic sports sector at £15.3bn

In this context, situating heritage as an archetypal representation of social and cultural infrastructure is key to elevating its role within national and place-based policy. Heritage organisations function as anchor organisations within place, supporting local economies through employment and procurement while providing spaces that foster social connection and collective identity. Treating heritage as infrastructure allows heritage-led programmes to be framed through a long-term perspective that is attractive to investors and pertinent to the unique needs of heritage organisations, addressing both upfront capital costs and the ongoing revenue needs of maintenance and programming. It also provides a foundation through which the complex and multi-layered governance processes associated with heritage, from national bodies to local asset custodians, can establish best practice.

Local authorities, acting as a linchpin of place, hold the mandate to integrate heritage into planning and regeneration strategies, and representing heritage as infrastructure within place planning cements the role of such assets and organisations within a wider strategic whole. Furthermore, in the context of devolution reforms, primarily in the form of the English Devolution and Community Empowerment Act 2026, regional mayors and strategic authorities can be empowered to utilise heritage as a driver for growth.

However, the sector faces significant hurdles:

- **Capacity:** Local authorities, following years of austerity, have seen a substantial real-terms fall in culture spending and associated losses of specialist roles such as conservation officers.
- **Funding imbalances:** National funding is fragmented and competitive, often favouring organisations with better capacity for bid-writing.

Unlocking the value of heritage will depend on institutional capability. The strongest outcomes occur when councils, communities, and heritage anchors align their efforts to treat heritage as a critical infrastructure asset for inclusive growth and resilience.

A framework for heritage within local economies

Nationally, heritage is a significant economic driver with a high multiplier effect: for every £1 of direct GVA generated by the heritage sector, an additional £1.93 is supported in the wider UK economy through supply chains and employee spending. However, heritage exists within a place-based economic system that comprises organisations, assets, and supply chains concerned with stewardship, conservation, interpretation, and productive use and reuse. The true measure of its economic impact therefore lies in the ability of heritage assets and organisations to retain value locally rather than allowing it to leak out to external markets.

" The lesson for places is that heritage must be visible within growth plans, local plans, cultural strategies, investment frameworks and outcome agreements, rather than appearing after core economic priorities have been set."



The Stratford-upon-Avon visitor economy was worth over £860m in 2024



Stratford-upon-Avon District valued tourism in 2021 at £320.2m and supporting 6628 jobs

A framework to track how heritage value moves through a local economy can be summarised as follows:

- **Demand and generation:** Heritage assets create appeal, which is converted into economic activity through admissions, trading, programming, conservation work, and wider place spend.
- **Capture and circulation:** Local firms and workers secure a share of this activity, which then circulates through wages and local procurement.
- **Retention:** Value is retained when it builds local skills and supplier networks; on the other hand, leakages result when ownership, labour, or materials sit outside the local geography.

In this report, Stratford-upon-Avon serves as a practical test of this framework. While Shakespeare's legacy generates global demand, the local benefit depends on converting footfall into visitor value. For local stakeholders, this involves increasing dwell time and encouraging overnight stays, as staying visitors spend significantly more across a wider range of local businesses than day trippers. Institutions such as the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust are vital economic anchors that support local jobs and skills.

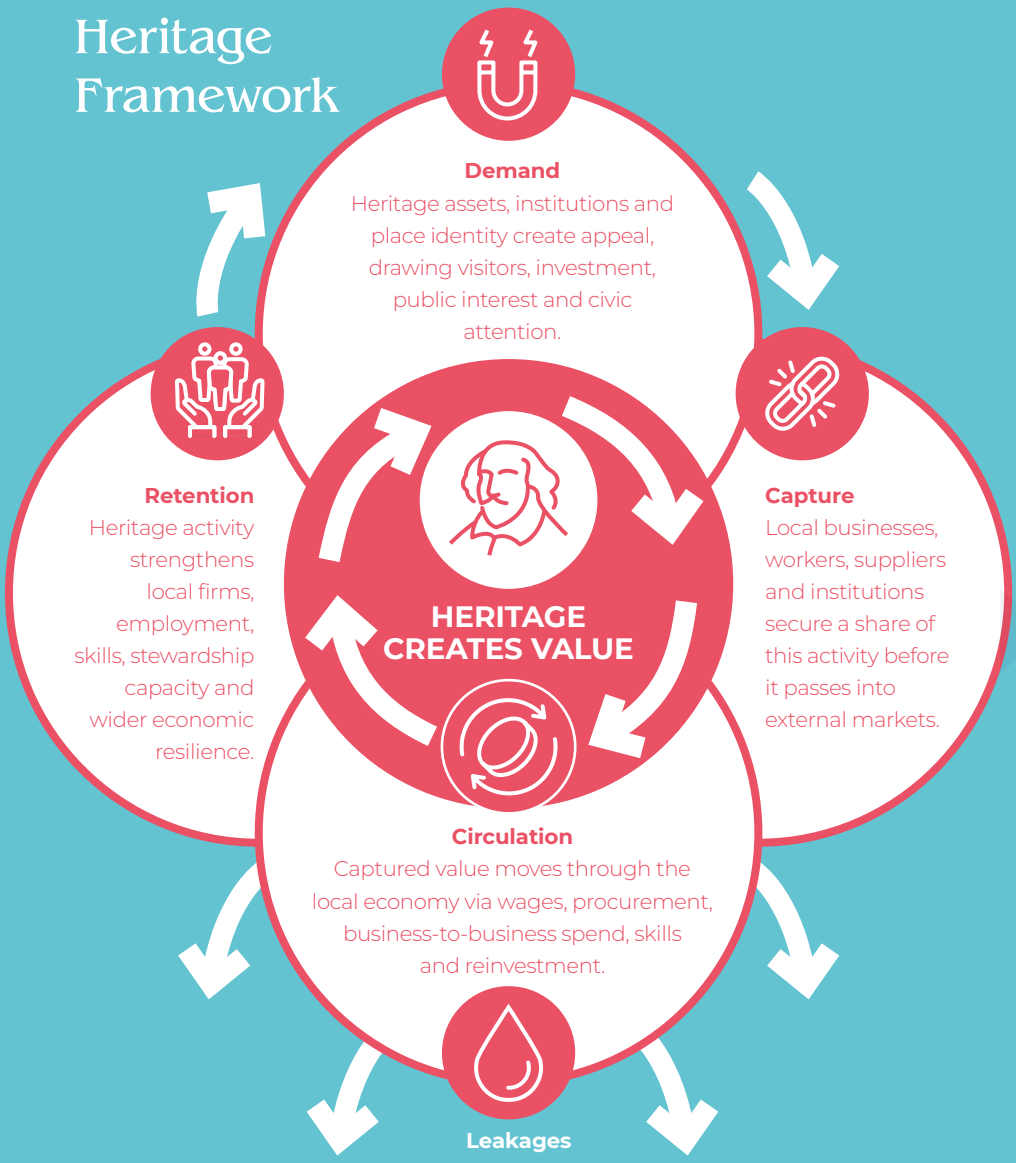
Value from heritage is rooted in physical assets that themselves require constant maintenance, making that work difficult to offshore. Consequently, with a substantial commitment to supporting productive capacity and skills at place level, the route to value retention becomes apparent. This commitment might take the form of promoting accessible procurement, designing contracts so local SMEs and specialist craftspeople can compete, and building local skills pipelines, using heritage estates to support apprenticeships and training, particularly for high-demand areas like historic building retrofit, which also contributes to the decarbonisation of the historic built environment.

A place-strengthening model is needed in which heritage acts as economic infrastructure, connecting demand to local firms and workers to retain value and build long-term community resilience.

The wider impacts of heritage

The public value of heritage is multifaceted: its impact extends far beyond traditional economic metrics and lies in its ability to foster wellbeing, social connection, and a sense of identity. However, these benefits depend heavily on access, representation, and participation: who defines heritage and who has the power to shape how heritage is used. For policymakers, inclusivity must therefore be a fundamental condition of heritage impact, rather than an additional discretionary concern.

Heritage Framework



Wellbeing and pride in place

Research indicates a strong link between heritage engagement and improved mental health, reduced loneliness, and increased life satisfaction. For instance, the wellbeing value for individuals living near heritage sites in the UK is estimated by DCMS at £29 billion annually. While the process of measuring these often-subjective benefits is complex, recent studies have identified tangible gains in adult health and productivity. Consequently, modern policy frameworks now encourage the use of mixed-indicator approaches to evidence non-monetisable outcomes such as pride in place and community attachment.

Traditional skills and education

The heritage sector faces significant challenges, including a critical shortage of traditional skills like stonemasonry, thatching, and timber framing due to funding cuts and rising costs. These skills are essential for maintaining the UK's built environment and play a vital role in green adaptation through sustainable retrofitting. Furthermore, a reciprocal relationship exists between heritage and education: heritage sites serve as trustworthy educational spaces that can mitigate misinformation, while education and training are necessary to sustain heritage for future generations.

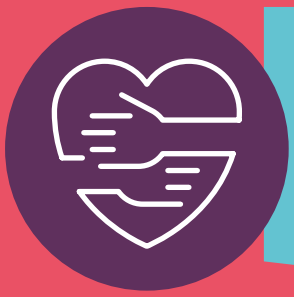
Inclusion and heritage literacy

The benefits of heritage are not automatic but can be undermined by social and demographic stratification in participation. To address this, organisations must move beyond tokenistic processes of engagement towards genuine heritage literacy, a process that empowers diverse audiences to interpret and shape their own narratives. This includes engaging with difficult topics to ensure that heritage reflects the full diversity of past and present communities; diversifying leadership to bring lived experience into boardrooms to better reflect local communities and dismantle systemic barriers; and recognising the non-use value of heritage assets, valuing them for their existence and their importance to future generations, even for those who do not visit them directly. Effective heritage stewardship thus requires a shift from top-down imperatives to inclusive practices that recognise the holistic value of tangible and intangible assets and cultural traditions.

" Unlocking the future of heritage will depend on institutional capability. The strongest outcomes occur when councils, communities and heritage anchors align their efforts to treat heritage as a critical and infrastructural asset for inclusive growth and resilience."



England's heritage sector directly employed 201,000 people in 2022 and supported an employment footprint of 523,000 jobs



The wellbeing value for individual living near heritage sites in the UK is estimated by DCMS at £29bn annually

Heritage-led growth

Heritage is a powerful catalyst for future growth, contributing significantly to the economic and social life of communities through job creation, tourism, and the revitalisation of the historic built environment. To maximise this value, policy must move heritage from the margins into the mainstream of place policy and leadership, ensuring it is embedded in economic, cultural, and spatial strategies rather than treated as a standalone conservation activity.

Strategic integration is essential, particularly in devolved settings where local and strategic authorities are increasingly expected to evidence outcomes like resilience, growth, and pride in place. Institutional tools such as place-based partnerships, heritage strategies, supplementary planning documents, and masterplans can help translate heritage values into the investment logic and planning rules that shape how a place is developed.

A key practical driver of renewal is adaptive reuse, which repurposes vacant historic buildings into functional spaces for housing, workspaces, and community infrastructure. Beyond influencing the character of a place, adaptive reuse supports modern environmental goals by preserving the embodied carbon of historic buildings. However, these projects often face a conservation deficit, where repair costs exceed market value, which can necessitate public or philanthropic support to ensure long-term viability and prevent these assets from becoming local 'white elephants'.

Meaningful regeneration also depends on community empowerment. Effective governance uses co-creation, where residents have genuine agency over what is protected and prioritised. By utilising asset-based community development, places can use heritage to foster social cohesion and support self-reliant communities. Pride in place is most effectively built when residents see their own histories reflected in local change and are given legal routes to own or shape their place's cultural infrastructure.

The primary role of local government in heritage-led growth is one of orchestration: convening diverse partners and aligning heritage activity with planning, skills and investment decision-making. Despite the importance of this role, there is a widening gap between policy demands and professional capacity due to staffing reductions and funding landscapes that prioritise one-off capital projects over long-term revenue. In the end, durable stewardship requires building robust, synergistic place systems that treat heritage as a living resource for contemporary life.

Five Layers of Heritage Governance

"The task for place leaders is to align these layers around shared outcomes"



We are the Home of Shakespeare for the World

The Shakespeare Birthplace Trust is empowered by an Act of Parliament to care for a unique collection of places and treasures, from the five Shakespeare Family Homes to more than one million documents and objects. Formed in 1847, we are the oldest conservation charity in the UK.

Our UNESCO-recognised Museum in Stratford-upon-Avon is the global centre for learning about and experiencing the life, times and work of the world's greatest storyteller.

Stratford-upon-Avon is the anchor of a South Warwickshire visitor economy worth over £860 million in 2024. The last clearly published town-specific economic impact estimate put Stratford-upon-Avon town's visitor economy at £239.7 million and 4,429 jobs in 2019.





More recently, the most robust post-pandemic figure is for Stratford-on-Avon District in 2021, when tourism was valued at £320.2 million and supported 6,628 jobs.

Stratford-upon-Avon's heritage economy is shaped by an unusually direct relationship between a globally recognised cultural figure and a specific local place.

Shakespeare's legacy operates as intangible cultural heritage, but in Stratford it is anchored through tangible assets: historic houses, archives, collections, theatres, streets, public spaces and visitor routes.

Shakespeare's legacy has shaped Stratford's economy since at least the eighteenth-century Shakespeare Jubilee. Stratford is one of the UK's most-visited towns, ranking in the top 20 for day-trippers and overnight visitors in 2024.

This place significance is also recognised strategically, with 'Shakespeare's England' - a not-for-profit membership organisation and public-private sector partnership recognised as the official tourism body for South Warwickshire (including Stratford-upon-Avon) – identified as central to the West Midlands visitor economy.

We are both a heritage custodian and a local anchor institution: we preserve assets of national and international importance while shaping Stratford's cultural, educational and visitor economy offer.



Our mission — to nurture a growing global community inspired by Shakespeare, rooted in Stratford-upon-Avon — reflects this position at the intersection of people, place and heritage.

Our work spans conservation, collections care, education, research, public programming and visitor experience. Alongside other cultural anchors, including the Royal Shakespeare Company, the Trust helps make Shakespeare a fundamental part of Stratford's placemaking.

In the post-pandemic years, a reliance on the tourist economy has come into stark relief against a long-term dampened trend in visitor numbers, which have failed to return to pre-pandemic levels. Meanwhile, our operations have felt the impacts of inflation on costs while the cost-of-living crisis has reduced consumer demand for even domestic travel.

Likewise, local authorities and other heritage sector anchor institutions are increasingly constrained themselves. Overall, the picture suggests that change is needed to keep abreast of the challenges.

At the same time, significant transformation is being considered across Stratford-upon-Avon's built environment. The proposed World Shakespeare Museum and the wider Stratford-upon-Avon Gateway Masterplan create a test of how heritage-led development can organise dispersed assets into a more coherent place offer.

The ambition is not simply to add a new museum, but to provide a more joined-up, coherent visitor offer in collaboration with Stratford-upon-Avon's other visitor and heritage organisations across the town centre and wider public realm.

In policy terms, the proposal raises the central questions explored throughout this report: how heritage investment can strengthen visitor experience, local identity, inclusive access, institutional collaboration and long-term economic resilience.

The Trust was therefore used throughout the report by Localis as a practical case study for three interlinked questions:

1. how tangible and intangible heritage can be integrated into a coherent place offer;
2. how heritage organisations can work with councils, strategic authorities, partners and communities to connect dispersed assets and visitor experiences; and
3. how heritage institutions can respond to financial and operating pressures while retaining, sharing and reinvesting the value they conserve and produce.



" The public value of heritage is multifaceted. Its impact extends far beyond traditional economic measures and lies in its ability to foster wellbeing, social connection and a sense of identity."



Local business turnover supported by tourism activity quoted as £233.5m, of which £187m direct turnover and £46.6m indirectly



VisitBritain evidence showed that 57% of international travellers surveyed ranked exploring history and heritage first as a motivation to visit the UK



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