Representation and Influencing Change

We Don't Settle

At We Don't Settle (WDS), our mission is to empower young people from minoritised backgrounds to influence change within the arts, cultural, and heritage sectors. We strive to amplify unheard voices and platform untold stories, encouraging the sector to become more inclusive, diverse, and representative of the society it serves.

This resource has been developed to equip young people and allies with the knowledge, tools, and strategies to drive systemic change. It explores the importance of representation, practical methodologies for influencing decision-making, and key strategies for addressing barriers to inclusivity. By providing detailed insights and actionable guidance, this resource aims to support both individuals and organisations in navigating the complexities of creating meaningful and lasting change.

Why Representation Matters

Arts, culture, and heritage play a pivotal role in shaping societal narratives, values, and memories. They preserve and share stories that define identities and influence how communities perceive themselves and others. However, these spaces have historically marginalised many voices, often reinforcing dominant narratives at the expense of diversity. Increasing representation in these sectors is essential to fostering a more inclusive society where everyone's stories are valued.

Representation is not just about inclusion; it is about equity and empowerment. When the workforce, governance structures, and cultural outputs reflect the diversity of society, they validate the experiences of historically excluded communities. This inclusivity enriches the sector's relevance, creativity, and ability to connect with audiences from all walks of life.

Key Areas of Inequity

WORKFORCE:

The arts and heritage workforce remains disproportionately dominated by individuals from privileged backgrounds.
Systemic barriers, such as unpaid internships, reliance on personal networks, and the cost of higher education, prevent many from accessing these fields.

For example, only 2.7% of the UK's workforce in museums and libraries are from global majority backgrounds, highlighting the lack of racial diversity within these institutions.

CONTENT:

The stories, objects, and narratives presented in cultural institutions often reflect a narrow perspective rooted in dominant cultural norms. This lack of diversity perpetuates stereotypes and excludes the lived experiences of minoritised communities.

Decolonising collections and integrating diverse narratives are critical steps toward addressing this imbalance.

AUDIENCES:

Visitor demographics frequently fail to reflect the diversity of the communities these institutions serve. This disconnect often stems from programming and spaces that feel unwelcoming or irrelevant to certain groups.

Engaging diverse audiences requires rethinking not only content but also the structures and practices that shape their delivery.

Representation across these areas is crucial to breaking down entrenched hierarchies and creating spaces that are welcoming, relevant, and empowering for all.

The Case for Change

Systemic barriers within the arts, cultural, and heritage sectors are deeply embedded. These include:

ECONOMIC INEQUITIES:

The prevalence of unpaid work and low-paid roles disproportionately excludes individuals from lower socio-economic backgrounds.

CULTURAL GATEKEEPING:

Access to opportunities often depends on personal networks, perpetuating exclusivity.

INSTITUTIONAL RESISTANCE:

Organisations may resist change due to a lack of understanding, fear of disruption, or entrenched biases.

For example, working-class candidates are underrepresented, with their chances of entering the sector declining over the past 40 years.

Addressing these barriers requires systemic interventions that challenge the status quo and create pathways for equitable participation.

Reimagining Power Dynamics

Traditional power structures within the sector often separate decision-makers from the communities they serve. This dynamic reinforces inequity and limits meaningful engagement. To influence change, it is essential to:

Involve minoritised individuals in governance and decision-making processes.	Shift from hierarchical to collaborative models of leadership.	Recognise and value lived experience as a form of expertise.

By reimagining these dynamics, the sector can move toward a more inclusive and equitable future.

Practical Strategies for Influencing Change

Governance determines how decisions are made within organisations. Key components include:

Boards:

Boards are responsible for setting strategic direction and ensuring accountability. Increasing board diversity is critical to incorporating a broader range of perspectives into decision-making.

Diverse boards are better equipped to address the needs and interests of underrepresented communities.

Committees and Working Groups:

These platforms provide specialised input and advisory roles, enabling organisations to incorporate diverse expertise into their operations.

Establishing youth and community advisory groups can bridge the gap between leadership and underrepresented stakeholders.

Understand Governance Structures

Build Skills and Confidence

Developing skills such as strategic thinking, influencing, and public speaking empowers individuals to participate effectively in governance and advocacy. Key strategies include:

TRAINING AND DEVELOPMENT:

Providing workshops and mentorship to build participants' confidence and capabilities.

PEER SUPPORT NETWORKS:

Creating spaces for individuals to share experiences and learn from one another.

Advocate for Inclusion

Organisations can take proactive steps to foster inclusivity:

YOUTH STEERING COMMITTEES:

Engage young people from diverse backgrounds to inform decision-making and programme design.

EQUITABLE RECRUITMENT PRACTICES:

Remove barriers such as unpaid internships and overly specific qualification requirements.

FAIR REMUNERATION:

Ensure that all contributors are compensated for their time and expertise.

Case Studies: Representation in Action

We Don't Settle Youth Steering Committee (YSC)

The YSC provides young people with opportunities to influence WDS's work. Members attend monthly meetings, co-create projects, and participate in board discussions.
Key outcomes include:

- Building skills in decision-making, advocacy, and strategic thinking.

- Ensuring WDS's work remains relevant and responsive to its community.

- Creating pathways for participants to pursue leadership roles within the sector.

My Voice, My Path, Our History at Roundhouse Birmingham

This project was delivered in partnership by We Don't Settle and Roundhouse Birmingham, who worked with five young Women of Colour to co-create a free audio tour sharing a selection of the local area's black histories, heritage, and spaces.
Key initiatives include:

- Developing and conducting participatory research that reflects the lived experiences of local residents, including interviewing Birmingham legend Benjamin Zephaniah, the acclaimed poet, writer, and activist, whose work has inspired audiences worldwide.

- Providing skills development and opportunities to make connections and develop confidence.

- Strengthening the organisation's connection to its surrounding communities.

Overcoming Challenges

Resistance often stems from fear of disruption or loss of power. Advocates for change can:

Present clear evidence of the benefits of inclusivity, such as improved audience engagement and organisational resilience.

Build coalitions and allies to amplify their message and create momentum for change.

Change can be slow in large institutions, where decision-making processes are often complex and hierarchical. Strategies to overcome this include:

Leveraging external networks and partnerships to advocate for change.

Ensuring transparency in governance structures and decision-making processes.

Using data and case studies to build a compelling case for action.

Tips for Advocates

01

Build Relationships:

Engage with allies and stakeholders across the sector to create a supportive network.

02

Be Strategic:

Align your goals with the organisation's mission and priorities to maximise impact.

03

Use Clear Communication:

Articulate your ideas confidently and persuasively, tailoring your message to your audience.

04

Collaborate:

PWork with others to co-create solutions, fostering a sense of shared ownership and accountability.

05

Be Resilient:

Recognise that systemic change takes time and persistence, and celebrate small victories along the way.

In Short

Representation is a cornerstone of equity within the arts, cultural, and heritage sectors. By diversifying decision-making and amplifying marginalised voices, we can create a sector that is more inclusive, relevant, and impactful. This resource aims to empower individuals and organisations to take actionable steps towards this vision, driving meaningful and lasting change. Through collective effort and a commitment to equity, we can transform the sector into a space where everyone's stories are valued and celebrated.

To learn more about WDS's programmes and how we embed co-creation in our practices, visit www.wedontsettle.com or reach out directly at info@wedontsettle.com to explore collaborative opportunities. Together, we can make a lasting impact in shaping an inclusive and equitable heritage, arts and cultural sector.

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