Oral History Festival 2026

An evaluation of the Oral History Festival

held at Nottingham Trent University, 4 July 2026

Organised by the Oral History Society (OHS) in partnership with Nottingham Trent University and the East Midlands Oral History Archive (EMOHA).

Authors

Verusca Calabria, Nottingham Trent University and Oral History Society

Jennifer Harding, London Metropolitan University and Oral History Society

Chris Reynolds, Nottingham Trent University

Natalie Braber, Nottingham Trent University

Executive summary

The Oral History Festival 2026 brought together 132 delegates at Nottingham Trent University on 4 July 2026. Organised by the Oral History Society (OHS) in partnership with Nottingham Trent University (NTU) Oral History Research Group and the East Midlands Oral History Archive (EMOHA), the festival was designed around participatory workshops that encouraged discussion, critical reflection and shared learning about oral history practice. Building on the first Festival in 2024, the programme featured 18 interactive workshops, a dedicated session for informal networking, a film screening and a final collective reflection. The festival was complemented by displays from Nottingham-based Five Leaves Bookshop, the Nottingham Feminist Archive, the Oral History Journal, and the University of Nottingham's Manuscripts and Special Collections, offering delegates further opportunities to explore oral history resources and related work.

Sixty-two anonymous evaluation responses were received, representing approximately 47% of attendees. Attendees represented a broad range of backgrounds, including community-based oral history practitioners, volunteers, independent and academic researchers, heritage professionals, archivists, students and creative practitioners. Feedback was overwhelmingly positive, with delegates particularly valuing interactive workshops, group discussions, opportunities to share practical approaches and connections across academic, heritage, independent and community settings. The respondents also identified ideas they intended to apply in their work and opportunities to follow up with people they had met.

The report examines the value of the festival's participatory format, the contribution of bursary support to widening access, and opportunities for improvement. It offers practical learning for the OHS and its partner organisations in developing future events that foster inclusive participation, collaboration and professional exchange.



Table of Contents

Executive summary 2

1. Background, partnerships and aims 4
2. Festival design and evaluation approach 5
3. Profiles of festival participants 6
4. Participatory workshops and learning 7
5. Connections, recognition and future practice 11
6. Widening participation: NTU-funded bursaries 12
7. Areas for improvement 14
   - Programme choice and access to workshops 14
   - Workshop design and facilitation 14
   - Inclusion and opportunities for connection 14
   - Representation and diversity of perspectives 15
   - Other practical feedback 15
8. Recommendations for future festivals 15
9. Conclusion 17

Acknowledgements 17

1. Background, partnerships and aims

The festival built on the experience of the first OHS Oral History Festival, held at the British Library in 2024, and on NTU's established relationship with the Oral History Society (OHS), including its hosting of the Society's 50th anniversary conference in 2023. The 2026 event was conceived as a one-day alternative to a conventional two-day conference, bringing volunteers, community historians, independent researchers, heritage professionals, students and academics into dialogue. Drawing on feedback from 2024 festival, particular emphasis was placed on ensuring that participation was embedded in workshop design from the outset. Facilitators were therefore asked to specify their planned interactive activities and methods of engagement in their proposals, ensuring that opportunities for discussion, practical activities and collaborative learning were integral to the sessions.

This report presents an evaluation of the 2026 Oral History Festival, drawing on delegate feedback to assess its achievements, identify areas for improvement and inform the planning of future events. Funding to support the festival was provided by Nottingham Trent University (NTU) on the condition that an evaluation report would be produced. Recognising that much oral history work is sustained by volunteers and community organisations with limited resources, the festival sought to create an accessible and inclusive space in which delegates could contribute and share their knowledge, experience and methods rather than simply receive information. The partnership brought together the OHS's national networks, NTU's academic and civic resources, including members of the NTU Oral History Research Group, and the East Midlands Oral History Archive's (EMOHA) regional network.

The festival aimed to promote inclusive knowledge exchange, encourage collaborative learning and critical reflection, strengthen connections between academic and community-based practitioners, and widen access through bursary support. A further objective was to draw lessons from the event to inform the planning and delivery of future Oral History Festivals.

2. Festival design and evaluation approach

The festival was organised around five parallel streams of workshops, designed to move away from the conventional conference format of formal paper presentations towards a programme centred on active participation, discussion and shared learning. This approach was reflected in the call for workshops, which explicitly encouraged interactive and participatory sessions rather than presentation-led contributions. Particular attention was given to the language of the call for workshop proposals, which emphasised 'active participation, critical reflection, and open discussion' and encouraged facilitators to 'foster meaningful interaction and collaboration among participants'. The call provided examples of engagement methods, including small-group work, individual reflection, drawing or sketching, and group listening followed by discussion. Applicants were asked to outline their planned activities and explain how these would encourage collaborative learning, embedding participation in workshop design from the outset.

The evaluation was designed to assess how far the festival achieved its objectives, particularly in relation to inclusive knowledge exchange, collaborative learning, opportunities for reflection and connections between practitioners from different backgrounds. It also sought to identify what delegates valued most, any barriers to participation and lessons that could inform future festivals.

The report draws primarily on an anonymous post-event evaluation survey completed by 62 delegates. The survey gathered overall and aspect-specific ratings, feedback on learning and professional connections, responses about the most valuable elements of the programme and intended follow-up activities, alongside open-text reflections. Additional feedback from bursary recipients provides further insight into the importance of financial support in enabling participation.

As participation in the evaluation was voluntary, the findings reflect the experiences and perceptions of respondents rather than all festival attendees. They provide valuable evidence of delegates' immediate experiences and intentions.

All 62 respondents rated the festival as either excellent or good, with 87% rating it as excellent (figure 1). The respondents also rated the festival highly in terms of value for money, with 97% rating it as excellent or good. These findings are particularly encouraging given the festival's commitment to providing accessible opportunities for learning, professional development and knowledge exchange.

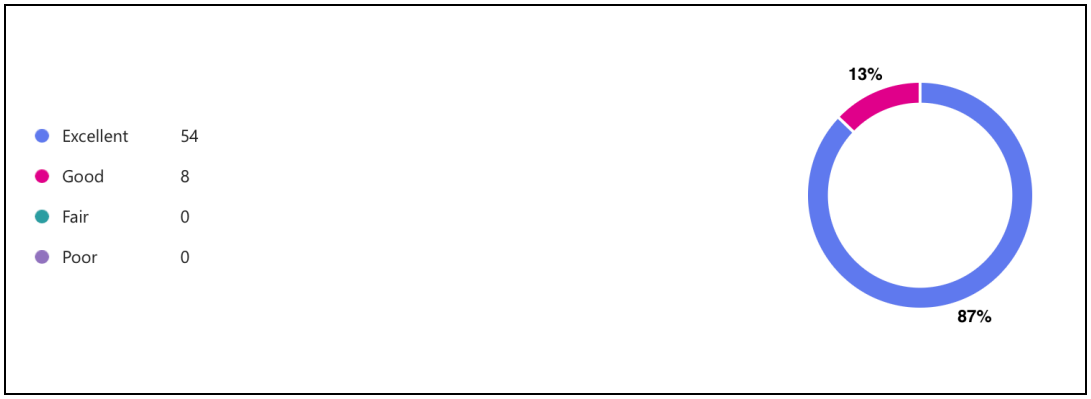

Figure 1. Overall evaluation of the Oral History Festival 2026.

3. Profiles of festival participants

The 62 respondents who completed the festival evaluation represented a diverse range of professional and community backgrounds. The largest groups identified as oral history practitioners (32%), academic researchers (26%) and heritage professionals (23%). Postgraduate students, archivists or librarians, and artists or creative practitioners each represented 18% of respondents, followed by community historians (15%), independent researchers (13%) and members of community organisations or groups (5%). A further 11% selected 'Other', while no respondents identified as undergraduate students. As respondents could select more than one category, these percentages reflect overlapping roles and identities rather than mutually exclusive groups (figure 2).

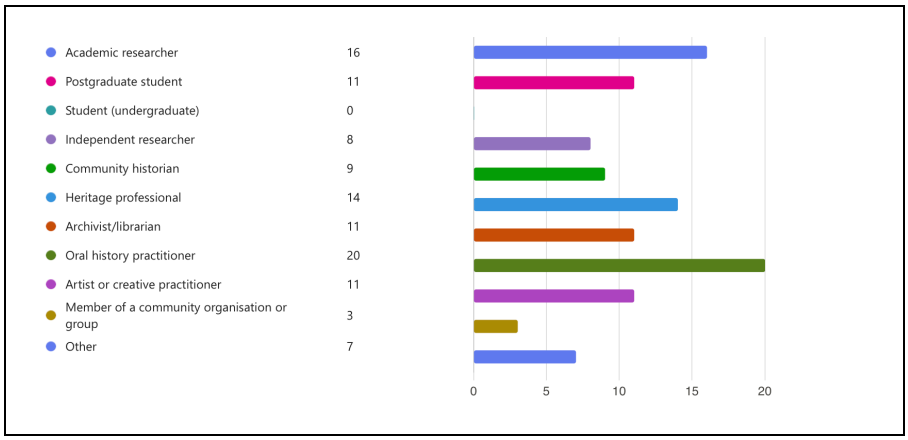

Figure 2. Professional and community backgrounds of evaluation respondents

Respondents included both those who had previously attended OHS activities and those engaging with the Society for the first time. This breadth of experience and expertise was particularly important given the festival's aim of bringing academic, professional and community-based practitioners together to exchange knowledge and learn from one another.

The diversity of participants was also reflected in feedback about the festival's inclusive atmosphere. As one respondent observed:

> The team created a friendly and inclusive event where practitioners, artists, freelancers and academics all contributed on equal terms.

Another respondent, who was new to oral history, reflected on how the welcoming atmosphere helped them participate:

> I am new to oral histories so was worried that I would feel out of my depth and inexperienced, but that wasn't the case - everyone was learning something new and everyone was so friendly and supportive.

4. Participatory workshops and learning

The value of doing, discussing, and reflecting with others emerged as the strongest recurring theme in the written responses, with the participatory nature of the festival identified as one of its most valued features.

When asked which aspects of the festival's format they valued most, respondents identified interactive workshops as the most popular (55; 89%), followed by group discussions (42; 68%), informal conversations during breaks (39; 63%) and opportunities to reflect on their own practice (38; 61%). Written responses similarly emphasised the value of creative activities, sharing practical skills, hearing about different projects and learning through discussion with others. Together, these findings reinforce the value of providing opportunities for participants to exchange experiences, reflect on their practice and engage with ideas through shared activities rather than solely through formal presentations (figure 3).

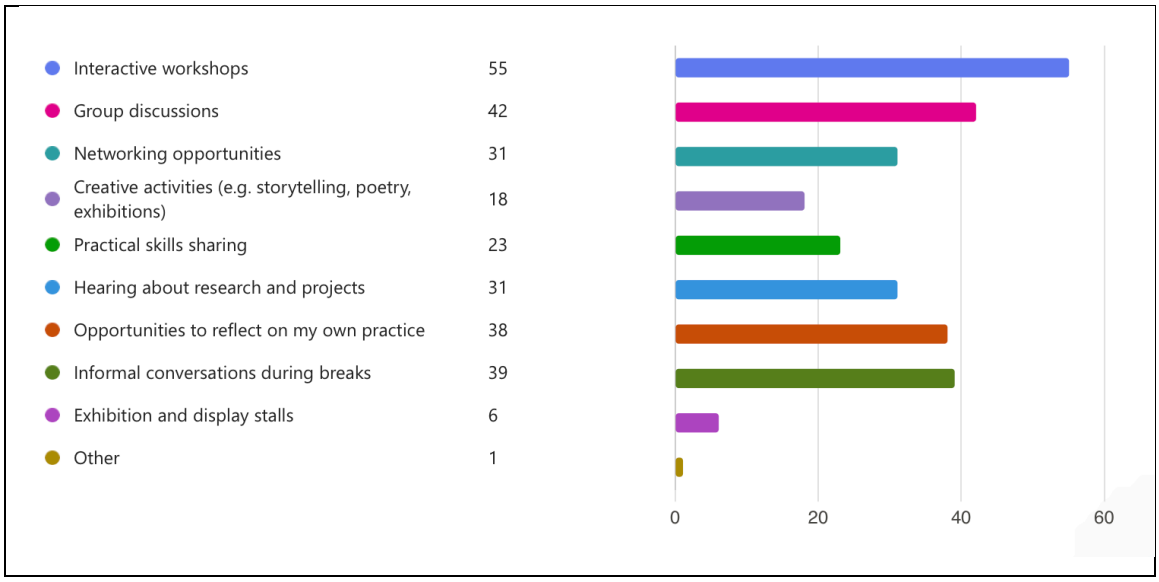

Figure 3. Most valued aspects of the festival's format and methods of engagement.

The value of the participatory approach was particularly evident in the reflections of one delegate who had initially been uncertain about the workshop format:

> I came to the OHS Festival a little unsure about how the workshop format would work, but came away convinced that future events should always have a workshop element - I thought it was great!

The festival showcased a range of creative and community-led approaches to oral history. One example was *Grandma's House: Stories, Sayings and the Sound of Home*, a community-led project celebrating African and Caribbean storytelling traditions, dialects, proverbs and intergenerational knowledge. The workshop brought together storytelling, discussion and creative activities to explore how cultural memories are shared across generations. These included a live story circle in which elders shared memories and traditional sayings, a collaborative 'Wall of Wisdom' where participants contributed proverbs from their own backgrounds, and the creation of painted 'Story Stones' inspired by stories or sayings that resonated with them. The activities highlighted the value of oral traditions in fostering cultural identity, belonging and connections between generations (figure 4).



Figure 4. Painted stones from the workshop "Grandma's House". © Verusca Calabria

Another workshop, *Crafting Listening: Listening to Craft*, explored how different listening conditions shape our engagement with oral testimony. Participants were invited to listen to the same audio extracts through different 'filters', including visual references, transcripts, headphones and creative activities such as drawing. By comparing these experiences, the workshop encouraged reflection on how images, written text and embodied activities can influence what listeners notice, understand, and interpret. This offered a practical way of examining listening as an active and interpretative process within oral history research (Figure 6).



Figure 5. Participants taking part in sensory listening at the “Crafting Listening” workshop. © Verusca Calabria

The workshop *Re-using Oral History Archives: Fears, Failures and Shared Authority* provides a further example of learning through facilitated discussion. The facilitators of the workshop (Figure 8) generously contributed a written report reflecting on the session, which brought together 23 participants working in four groups. Using audio-visual interview material and two rounds of small-group discussion, participants explored ethical uncertainties surrounding the re-use of oral history archives, including trust, narrator agency, consent, and shared authority. The discussions considered the involvement of relatives or supporters in interviews, the importance of contextual documentation, and the need for adaptable interviewing approaches. Practical suggestions included allowing more time for responses, using meaningful objects or photographs and clarifying roles before interviewing. The facilitators' account provides evidence of the critical reflection and practical insights generated through the workshop.



Figure 6. The facilitators of the “Re-using oral history archives” workshop. © Verusca Calabria

One delegate also highlighted the supportive and participatory atmosphere of several sessions, including *Getting Your Work Published with the Oral History Journal*:

> Lovely thoughtful people running the sessions I attended (re-using archives, getting your work published, launch of local journalism SIG, women's voices). Lots of opportunities for everyone to contribute.



Figure 7. Some of the participants attending the workshop "Getting Your Work Published". © Verusca Calabria

Across the wider evaluation, delegates described discovering collaborative ways of working, considering alternative approaches to presenting oral history to the public, and broadening their understanding of what oral history practice can encompass. One respondent described the collaborative character of the workshops as challenging but worthwhile. Another reflected on how the sessions encouraged them to reconsider their own practice:

> The thought-provoking sessions really prompted me to think about my own oral history practice and how it can be improved to become more inclusive.

These responses suggest that participatory formats created opportunities for experimentation, critical reflection, and reciprocal learning across different levels of experience.

These findings reinforce the value of retaining a participatory approach in future festivals, while recognising that delegates valued different forms of engagement. The parallel programme inevitably limited the number of workshops individuals could attend, highlighting the importance of offering a diversity of formats, clear session descriptions, and sufficient time for meaningful participation.

5. Connections, recognition and future practice

Participants selected opportunities to connect with others, exchange experiences, and reflect on their practice as important elements of the festival. The evaluation also asked what delegates intended to do next: options included following up with people they met, applying ideas in their work, exploring research or funding opportunities, beginning collaborations and attending future OHS events.

The festival also encouraged participants to consider how they might apply their learning and develop new professional relationships. Of the 62 respondents, 50 (81%) intended to attend future Oral History Society events, 48 (77%) planned to follow up with someone they had met, and 42 (68%) intended to apply ideas from the festival to their work or practice. A further 22 respondents (35%) planned to explore new research or funding opportunities, while 11 (18%) expressed an intention to initiate a new collaboration or project (figure 8).

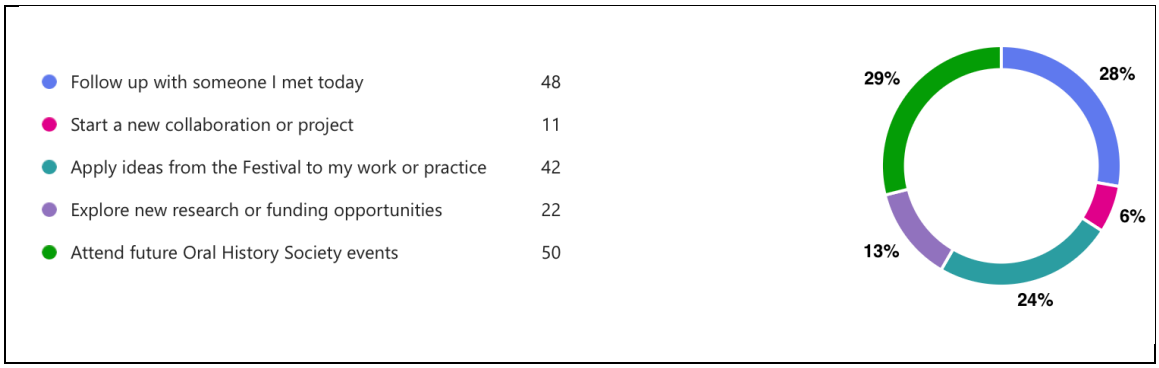

Figure 8. Participants' intended actions following the festival.

The qualitative responses suggest that encounters across different roles helped some delegates feel more connected to the oral history community and more aware of possible approaches to their own projects. These comments are especially relevant to the festival's intention to recognise the expertise of community-based practitioners alongside that of academics and heritage professionals.

Beyond opportunities for networking and future collaboration, respondents also highlighted the importance of the festival in fostering a sense of professional connection, recognition, and belonging. For one participant, the event provided a welcome opportunity to connect with others working in a field that can sometimes feel isolating:

> I feel energised and motivated - often oral history work is a solitary process for the practitioner so this was a very validating and useful day.

Another respondent reflected on the sense of belonging that the festival had fostered:

> I have never felt more like I am part of the Oral History community than at this event. It meant so much to me.

The above intentions are promising indicators, but further contact would be needed to assess whether collaborations or changes to practice were sustained. A short optional follow-up survey several months after future events would strengthen evidence of longer-term outcomes.



Figure 9. Networking during the festival © Verusca Calabria

6. Widening participation: NTU-funded bursaries

The festival received £2,000 in bursary funding from two NTU research centres: the Centre for Policy, Citizenship and Society and the Centre for History, Memory and Heritage (£1,000 each). This funding supported 15 bursary places, representing approximately 11% of the 132 festival attendees. The bursaries were intended to reduce financial barriers to participation, particularly for volunteers, independent researchers and those working in under-resourced community organisations.

To understand the impact of this support, bursary recipients were invited to provide a short written testimonial separately from the anonymous festival evaluation survey, explaining how the funding had enabled their participation and what they had gained from attending. Two testimonials were available for this report, offering insights into the financial barriers faced by some participants and the opportunities made possible through bursary support. The accounts have been anonymised, with potentially identifying details about individuals' circumstances and specific activities omitted.

The first recipient, an independent researcher facing employment uncertainty, described the bursary as “key to my being able to attend”. Their attendance provided opportunities to contribute to professional discussions, exchange ideas with colleagues and receive valuable feedback to inform future activities. Their account illustrates how financial support can enable active participation in professional networks and knowledge exchange.

A second recipient, a postgraduate researcher experiencing insecure employment and financial uncertainty, described how these circumstances had affected their ability to participate in professional events. Despite being committed to contributing to the festival programme, they had seriously considered withdrawing because they could not afford the registration fee.

Describing the bursary as “a lifeline for people like myself”, they emphasised the importance of such support for those committed to oral history but facing financial insecurity. They also expressed a desire to contribute to the bursary scheme themselves once their circumstances improved, reflecting a sense of reciprocity within the oral history community.

Although these accounts represent the experiences of only two recipients, they highlight how financial barriers can affect not only who attends professional events but also whose knowledge, experience and contributions are represented within the programme. The bursary scheme therefore supported the festival's wider commitment to inclusive participation and knowledge exchange.



Figure 10. Participants listening to an audio extract in one of the workshops © Verusca Calabria

7. Areas for improvement

Alongside the overwhelmingly positive feedback, respondents identified several areas for improvement relevant to the festival's aims of inclusive participation, collaborative learning and knowledge exchange.

Programme choice and access to workshops

While respondents welcomed the breadth of the programme, several expressed frustration at having to choose between workshops taking place simultaneously. One delegate commented:

> A very well organised and enjoyable day. Just difficult to choose between the different sessions in each strand! So much of interest.

Suggestions included providing access to workshop resources after the event, offering additional opportunities to attend popular sessions and considering ways to share learning across the parallel streams. These comments reflect the challenge of balancing a varied programme with opportunities for more sustained engagement.

Workshop design and facilitation

Some respondents highlighted differences in how effectively workshops supported participation and learning. Feedback emphasised the importance of clear session descriptions, appropriate preparation and ensuring that activities matched delegates' expectations. Respondents also highlighted the need to allocate sufficient time for activities, discussion and reflection, while ensuring that sessions finished as scheduled. As one delegate observed:

> Length of workshop is always a tricky one - some worked really well, whilst some clearly needed more time - appreciate that this is hard to gauge at planning stages

Accessibility within workshops was another consideration, with one respondent highlighting difficulties hearing when microphones were not consistently used. This underlines the importance of ensuring that participatory activities are accessible to everyone, including during small-group discussions and contributions from the audience.

Together, these observations suggest that future festivals could provide clearer guidance for facilitators on workshop structure, managing group activities, allocating sufficient time for discussion and reflection, and ensuring accessible participation throughout.

Inclusion and opportunities for connection

Although the festival was widely praised for its welcoming atmosphere, some respondents suggested that more structured opportunities for networking would help those attending independently or for the first time. One delegate described finding it difficult to join conversations when other participants already appeared to know one another. Suggestions included facilitated introductions, optional networking activities, and dedicated time for group discussions.

Respondents also raised the importance of making the festival accessible to early-career practitioners and those working outside established academic or professional networks. These comments reinforce the value of bursary provision alongside other approaches to widening participation.

Representation and diversity of perspectives

A small number of respondents suggested that future programmes could provide greater opportunities to hear directly from people who had contributed their oral histories, as well as community-based practitioners working outside academia. One respondent proposed including the perspectives of interviewees, particularly their experiences of participating in oral history projects and the longer-term significance of that involvement.

This feedback is particularly relevant to the festival's commitment to recognising different forms of expertise and ensuring that knowledge exchange extends beyond established professional and academic perspectives.

Other practical feedback

A small number of respondents also commented on catering, room temperatures and other venue-related arrangements. While these observations are relevant to the organisation of future events, they fall outside the principal focus of this evaluation, which examines participation, learning, collaboration, and the value of the festival's format.

8. Recommendations for future festivals

Participants' preferences for future events provide useful evidence to inform the planning of future Oral History Society activities. Skills and methods workshops were the most popular option, selected by 47 respondents (76%), followed by one-day in-person events (40; 65%), regional in-person events (36; 58%) and networking events for oral history practitioners (35; 56%). These findings suggest considerable appetite for accessible, practice-oriented events that bring together people working across different areas of oral history (see figure 12).

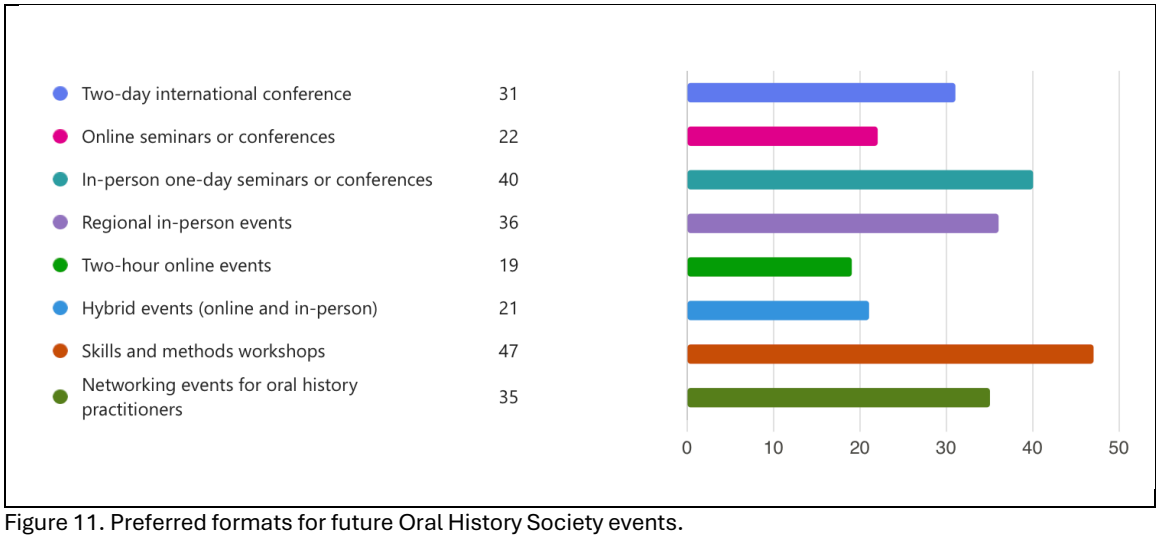

Figure 11. Preferred formats for future Oral History Society events.

The evaluation findings suggest the following recommendations:

- **Retain participatory and creative workshops** as a defining feature of future festivals, while offering a range of activities and approaches to accommodate different interests, experiences, and ways of learning.
- **Review the structure of the parallel programme** to reduce the difficulty of choosing between sessions. Consider repeating popular workshops, sharing workshop resources after the event, or creating opportunities for delegates to exchange learning across different sessions.
- **Strengthen guidance for workshop facilitators**, building on the participatory approach established through the call for workshops. Encourage clear descriptions of planned activities and expectations for participation, appropriate preparation, effective management of group activities, and sufficient time for discussion and reflection.
- **Embed accessibility in workshop design and delivery**, including consistent microphone use, consideration of participants' hearing and communication needs, and ensuring that different forms of participation are supported.
- **Protect opportunities for informal networking and connection**, while introducing optional, low-pressure activities to help first-time attendees and those attending independently engage with other delegates.
- **Strengthen the representation of community voices and lived experience**, including opportunities for oral history interviewees and community participants to contribute their perspectives on the process and significance of oral history work.
- **Maintain affordable registration fees and, where possible, expand bursary provision** to reduce financial barriers to participation, particularly for volunteers, independent researchers, postgraduate students and others working with limited resources. Continue gathering feedback from bursary recipients to understand how financial support enables both attendance and active participation.
- **Consider regional and accessible event formats**, reflecting respondents' interest in one-day and regional events, alongside opportunities for skills development and networking.
- **Introduce a short follow-up evaluation** several months after future festivals to explore whether intended collaborations, professional connections, and changes in practice have been sustained.

9. Conclusion

The 2026 Oral History Festival offers a useful example of how a national professional gathering can place shared practice, dialogue, and creative participation at its centre. The immediate evaluation indicates that delegates valued opportunities to learn with others, encounter different perspectives and make connections across professional and community settings. The bursary scheme also represents an important commitment to addressing the uneven resources available to potential participants.

For the OHS, NTU and EMOHA, the principal lesson is not simply that the festival was well received, but that the form of the event mattered. Future festivals can build on its participatory strengths while addressing practical barriers, balancing programme choice with opportunities for deeper engagement, and collecting better evidence of sustained outcomes.

The value of bringing people together to share experiences and learn from one another was perhaps best captured by one participant:

> There's no better way to share the wealth of experience held by oral history practitioners than by bringing people together in a space where we can talk about it with each other - the Oral History Festival does just that.

Acknowledgements

The authors thank everyone who contributed to and attended the Oral History Festival 2026, including workshop facilitators, community participants, volunteers and those who completed the evaluation. The Oral History Society gratefully acknowledges bursary support from Nottingham Trent University's Centre for Policy, Citizenship and Society and Centre for History, Memory and Heritage.

Also, a big thank you goes to the members of the festival's organising group:

Verusca Calabria, Jennifer Harding, Chris Reynolds, Natalie Braber, Colin Hyde, Cynthia Brown, Rib Davis and Alan Butler.

A special thank you to Polly Owen, the OHS events manager for coordinating all of the festival activities, without her none of this work would have been possible.

The authors also acknowledge £2,000 financial support from NTU's Centre for Policy, Citizenship and Society and the Centre for History, Memory and Heritage towards festival bursaries.