

Consultation Summary

Voices from the Community – A Deep Listening Approach

Executive Summary

Between February and May 2025, Global Grooves undertook a wide-reaching community consultation to inform the development of Dancing Threads. This was not a token gesture nor a box-ticking exercise, but an intentional act of listening - designed to uncover not only enthusiasm for heritage-based engagement, but also the nuanced challenges, aspirations, and critical reflections that shape how people experience and inherit culture today.

More than 140 individuals and organisations contributed to the consultation, representing three key constituencies:

Community participants (including dancers, musicians, textile artists, volunteers and youth practitioners)

Community heritage organisations (from Morris sides to carnival troupes to textile guilds)

Sector experts (including choreographers, producers, musicians, cultural strategists, and heritage professionals)

Consultation took place through a mixed-method approach: face-to-face meetings, online Zoom interviews with sector specialists, and a widely distributed online survey shared via our partners, expert advisors, and established networks. In several cases, partner organisations ran their own internal workshops with participants and provided summarised group feedback. The breadth of input, depth of reflection, and diversity of voices shaped not only this document but the future direction of the Dancing Threads project as a whole.

"These traditions will only survive if we pass them on—together, with care."

All quotes included are anonymised with consent, and feedback was gathered from a demographically diverse cross-section of participants. Although formal demographic data collection was not mandatory, care was taken to ensure contributions were inclusive across gender, age, ethnicity, and geography.

1. Community Participants: Heritage as Healing, Identity and Connection

Among individual artists and participants, many of whom engage with heritage through dance, music, costume, textiles or storytelling, a central theme emerged: cultural participation is a vehicle for personal transformation, emotional healing, and communal belonging. These are not abstract benefits. They are felt experiences - often described with startling clarity.

Several participants spoke about the confidence and mental wellbeing they had gained through shared practice, particularly in women-led creative groups. One dancer reflected:

"Working with a group of women and performing publicly has helped to build my confidence... I know I can always call on them for help and vice versa."

Another participant described her evolving sense of place and identity:

"I have struggled to feel part of the community I was born in, but being part of this group has made me feel like I belong - even now, when I no longer live there."

This sense of belonging through collective creativity was deepened by intergenerational exchange. Participants spoke warmly about the role of elders and the unique knowledge they bring:

"I love it when there's a mix of ages. Everyone brings something different. Elders guide, young people innovate." "It's not just about teaching skills. It's about being seen and heard." "It reminds me that my grandmother had these same skills. We're more connected than we think."

These reflections were often accompanied by a reverence for traditional skills, particularly those passed down informally or dormant for years. A textiles session with South Asian women, for example, unlocked long-suppressed memories:

"In practicing embroidery, memories of elders passing down sewing skills were unlocked. They hadn't done it in years." "I'd forgotten how much I loved stitching. It brought my aunties back to me."

This reawakening of inherited skills was often framed as an act of quiet resistance - against invisibility, against forgetting, and against the erasure of women's labour. It was also linked to environmental values and sustainability. Participants recognised that traditional practices often involve a deep respect for materials, re-use, and frugality - not out of scarcity, but as a form of ecological wisdom:

"There's a lot in our society that can be reused and given a new life, even if it's in a completely different form." "My gardening uses repurposed timbers, twine, plant pots... it all links back." "We were sustainable before it was called that - we just didn't waste things."

This convergence of sustainability, skill, and identity was mirrored in reflections on rhythm, movement, and music:

"Rhythm and repetition are grounding. There's something ancient in it. You feel it in your bones." "When I dance, I'm not thinking - I'm remembering." "You carry it in your body. It's like memory that moves."

2. Community Heritage Organisations: Between Continuity and Change

Established community heritage groups brought a longer view. Their contributions were marked by deep care for the traditions they steward, but also anxiety about continuity and survival. Many organisations spoke of an acute need to pass on skills, recruit new members, and evolve without losing integrity.

"We have the dances, the stories, the costumes - but no one to pass them to" said one group leader.

This feeling of being custodians without successors was echoed widely, and often accompanied by frustration at the structural barriers to visibility, recognition and resource:

"We keep getting told our work is important, but it rarely translates into funding." "It feels like we're always on the outside looking in." "We want to reach out - but we're stuck in survival mode."

There was a strong desire to break out of isolation. Many welcomed the project's cross-cultural ethos, describing it as:

"A way to bridge meaningfully across communities while respecting the integrity of each tradition." "Morris and dhol on the same bill? Yes please. These connections have always existed - but we need help making them visible."

Organisations emphasised that public visibility matters, not only for outreach but for cultural confidence and pride:

"People light up when they see their heritage reflected in a parade or a costume or a rhythm. It says: you belong here." "If people don't see it, they think it's gone." "Sometimes, being seen is what keeps a tradition alive."

In textile towns, the symbolism of material culture was especially powerful:

"Textiles are our history in this place. When they reappear through art or performance, people feel proud again." "Every stitch carries a story - about work, about women, about this town." "It's the first time some of our young people understood what the mill meant."

These responses suggest a community sector that is ready to collaborate, but needs structural scaffolding to do so with care and sustainability. The groups consulted were not resistant to change - in fact, many were hungry for evolution - but they stressed that change must be accompanied by genuine co-production, visibility, and practical support:

"We're proud of our roots - but that doesn't mean we don't want to evolve." "Respect doesn't mean freezing things. It means listening and growing together." "We want to innovate - but not alone, and not at the cost of losing what we've built."

3. Sector Experts: Heritage as a Living, Political Practice

Cultural sector professionals, ranging from choreographers and musicians to heritage consultants, placed Dancing Threads within a broader discourse of equity, sustainability, and cultural democracy. Their responses were both affirming and strategically challenging, suggesting that the project could offer a model for reimagining heritage leadership and policy at the local and national level.

Experts consistently challenged the idea of heritage as a fixed or nostalgic domain:

"Heritage isn't about nostalgia - it's about identity. Who we are now, where we come from, what we choose to remember." "Intangible heritage is what preserves what it means to be human. All the nuanced ways we communicate what is unspoken." "It's not about looking back - it's about keeping something alive by moving forward."

This emphasis on intangible heritage as a dynamic process of transmission was central. Experts highlighted the importance of embodied skill and relational learning, especially between generations:

"The traditional skills and knowledge are most genuinely passed from master to student." "Elders are anchors. Young people bring innovation." "It's not about hierarchy - it's about exchange."

Several experts stressed the need to recognise music and rhythm as heritage in their own right, not just as supporting elements in multidisciplinary projects:

"This project could unlock something powerful if music is treated not as accompaniment, but as heritage." "Rhythm is a thread between cultures - you can feel it in Morris, dhol, samba. It's ancestral." "You don't need language to inherit rhythm - it finds you."

Environmental sustainability also emerged as a cross-cutting concern. Experts encouraged a return to traditional making methods, local sourcing, and reduced travel, not as symbolic acts, but as practical strategies for long-term sustainability:

"Look to the past - there were more climate-kind ways of doing things that we've forgotten." "We need to rethink our models of production. Sustainability must be embedded - not added on." "We inherit more than stories - we inherit systems. Let's choose which ones to keep."

4. Constructive Challenges and Our Response

5. Conclusion: Heritage as a Commons for the Future

The consultation findings reveal that Dancing Threads does not stand alone - it is part of a growing call for a more inclusive, relational, and sustainable heritage landscape. Community members, heritage holders and cultural professionals alike are asking for a shift - from nostalgia to relevance, from isolation to interdependence, from inheritance to co-creation.

This project is not built on assumption. It is rooted in the real, often hard-earned insights of the people it hopes to serve. Their voices - reflective, joyful, worried, inspired - have shaped every element of the design.

Dancing Threads directly responds to these voices. It supports the need for intergenerational exchange, greater visibility of underrepresented traditions, and practical infrastructure for collaboration and care. By foregrounding co-creation, cultural equity, and ecological consciousness, the project creates space for heritage holders to lead, evolve, and connect across boundaries - on their own terms and with the dignity their practices deserve.

The consultation has already led to tangible outcomes. Some groups not previously connected with Global Grooves are now arranging visits to The Vale studios to explore collaboration on costume and textiles development as part of other projects. The emphasis on elder knowledge and textile heritage has directly shaped how we plan to engage older participants and women's groups through tailored workshops, while music and movement insights have influenced the content and format of our parade programme. This is not just feedback - it is co-authorship, already shaping future action.

"We've inherited so much. Now it's our turn to pass it on - just in new ways."

"It's not about saving the past. It's about making it part of our future."

"Keep the thread going - that's how it lives."
