

Response to the Aging Society Grand Challenge



19th July 2018

As part of its Industrial Strategy, the Government has identified four 'Grand Challenges', one of which is our Aging Society. [The Aging Society Grand Challenge](#) aims to explore both the problems and opportunities that aging presents.

The first mission of the Aging Society Challenge is 'to ensure that people can enjoy at least 5 extra healthy, independent years of life by 2035, whilst narrowing the gap between the experience of the richest and poorest'. To help achieve this goal, the Government asked,

'How can we best support people to have extra years of being healthy and independent?'

The Heritage Alliance's response to this question:

Heritage can help us live healthier lives for longer

The Heritage Alliance is England's biggest coalition of heritage interests, bringing together nearly 130 mainly national organisations supported by over 7 million members, friends, volunteers, trustees and staff. From historic buildings and museums to canals, historic vehicles and steam railways, the Heritage Alliance's diverse membership owns, manages and cares for the vast majority of England's historic environment and forms a key part of the cultural sector.

The Benefits of Heritage Engagement

Heritage sites already help many people to live a healthier life for longer. The simple existence of special places like heritage sites can contribute positively to someone's mental health; a 2014 Simetrica study estimated the well-being value of visiting heritage sites to be equivalent to £1,646 per person per year. This supports the finding of a 2015 HLF survey, in which about half answered 7 or more out of 10 when asked to rate the impact local heritage sites on their personal quality of life. Similarly, research undertaken by Age UK in 2017, revealed that engagement with creative and cultural activities including heritage, makes the highest contribution of 5.75% to one's overall well-being. All these figures can be found in Historic England's ['Heritage Counts 2017 – Heritage and Society'](#).

A 2016 DCMS study, found that those who had visited a heritage site in the past 12 months reported a happiness score on average 1.6 greater than those who had not. Indeed, the National Trust's ['Places that Make us report'](#) discovered that the amygdala (a key area in the brain known to process emotion) was activated by a place deemed to be special by an individual. The special place caused a response in the amygdala far greater than that to meaningful objects, such as a wedding ring or photograph.

There is a suggestion that maintaining heritage sites is particularly important to older generations; a Centre for Economics and Business Research (CEBR) 2013 survey of 2,001 UK adults found that 73% of over 55s felt that local heritage buildings and sites are important to their local community, in comparison with 69% of the total interviewees. Moreover, it seems the number of people who value their local heritage is only increasing, as in 2015, DCMS research found that 95% of adults agree or

strongly agree that it is important to them that heritage buildings and places are well looked after. These figures again come from Historic England's ['Heritage Counts 2017 – Heritage and Society'](#). Thus, simply by continuing to support heritage organisations, the Government is improving the mental health of all, and particularly older, citizens.

The Benefits of Heritage Volunteering

The volunteering opportunities offered by heritage organisations also provide a way to actively improve one's mental and physical health. The scale of heritage volunteering is impressive: the number of heritage volunteers rose from 575,300 in 2014/15 to 615,500 in 2015/16, more than the population of Glasgow! The National Trust, one of The Heritage Alliance's members, has over 65,000 volunteers alone. Similarly, the 42 English Anglican cathedrals have over 14,000 volunteers (data collected 2014). By encouraging the elderly out of their homes and by giving them roles that can involve physical work, heritage volunteering promotes a healthy lifestyle.

The correlation between volunteering and improved mental health is made clear in a [2011 Heritage Lottery Fund project](#), which investigates 'the social impact of volunteering in an HLF-funded projects' and accounts for problems of 'reverse causality' (that it is those with a higher mental health who choose to volunteer in the first place) and 'self-selection' (that those who choose to volunteer have characteristics that incline them to also have a higher mental health), that may otherwise cloud the results. Of the volunteers surveyed, 42.5% agreed that they 'actively seek out information' more than they did before they began volunteering. Furthermore, 92% of volunteers had succeeded in meeting new people, and 35% went on to sustain these relationships by socialising with these acquaintances outside of the project. Moreover, three quarters of the volunteers surveyed believed 'very strongly' or 'fairly strongly' that they belonged in their neighbourhood, with 27% saying that their volunteering had inclined them more to agree that they belonged.

Similarly, a survey of volunteers who took part in the 2016 Heritage Open Days, revealed that 69% felt 'more relaxed', while 64% felt healthier and more active having taken part in the event.

Numerous testimonies of volunteers attest to the positive impact volunteering can have. To take just one example, an elderly gentleman who had volunteered on Point of Ayr Community Heritage Group's project, 'Point of Ayr Then and Now', said talking about the pit and volunteering on the project had lifted his spirits and 'brought him back to life'.

Heritage volunteering is particularly relevant because it accounts for 6% of all voluntary work undertaken in England, and is generally most popular among the elderly, assuming the HLF volunteer group can be taken as indicative of wider demographic trends (the 2011 HLF research found that 43% of volunteers were over 60). Heritage volunteering therefore provides a fantastic opportunity to engage older people in activities that both excite them and provide mental health benefits.

Extending the benefits of Heritage

More ought to be done to ensure that the health benefits provided by heritage volunteering are available to all. While no demographic evidence exists for the sector as a whole, if the [2009-11 HLF reports](#) are taken as representative, minorities and those who hold or held 'blue collar' occupations, are under-represented in the heritage volunteering sector, with only 7% of volunteers identifying as BAME and with 79% of volunteers working, or having worked in the three most highly skilled occupational groupings.

One way in which heritage volunteering opportunities might be extended to those currently less engaged in the heritage sector, is through social prescribing. In recent years, great steps towards an

effective social prescribing system, such as the establishment of a new NHS national league, have been made, but social prescribing is still not employed to its full potential.

The effectiveness of social prescribing was evidenced by UCL's research project '[Museums on Prescription](#)', which explored possible mechanisms for social prescribing. The project connected 115 people, referred by local authorities and other organisations, to ten-week programmes in museums, in which they explored the collections and learned new conservation skills. The participants experienced a quantifiable rise in well-being, with a clear reduction in social isolation and a new sense of belonging evident in their subsequent interviews. The participants also saw a reduction in visits to their GP, improvements in their mood, a reduction in symptoms of anxiety and/or depression, and a rise in their physical health.

Why the contribution is important

The Heritage Alliance's response is important, because it evidences how heritage can provide valuable solutions to the problems arising from an aging population. Visiting and volunteering in the heritage sector can provide physical and mental health benefits, as it both encourages people out of their homes, and stimulates learning and skills development.

As a unifying force, which brings together communities across generational, ethnic and socio-economic divides, heritage can help to tackle any feelings of isolation which many elderly people suffer from.

Extending the benefits of engaging the heritage sector to as wide an audience as possible should be closely examined by the Government. In this, we think social prescribing could be a particularly useful tool.