Response to Call for Evidence on Draft Loneliness Strategy

The Heritage Alliance

19th July 2018

DCMS has called for evidence and views on its proposed new strategy to tackle loneliness. The strategy will include policies intended to reduce the risk of loneliness across all groups in society, and some that focus on reducing the risk at specific trigger points for key groups highlighted by the ONS analysis: young people; people in poor health; carers; unemployed people; and bereaved people. More information on the Call for Evidence can be found here https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/call-for-evidence-on-approach-to-loneliness-strategy.

Responses to the Call for Evidence were collected online. The Heritage Alliance's response is below:

Q: We're keen to understand the different ways that loneliness is currently being tackled, what works best and for whom. Thinking about your experience with tackling loneliness, please tell us about any projects or initiatives you have found particularly effective and why you think this is.

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. Many of these organisations will have direct experience of tackling loneliness in various ways.

Historic sites and our heritage more broadly are fantastic tools for tackling loneliness. Heritage can cultivate a strong sense of place around which local identities are formed. Indeed, much of our sense of community, whether national or local, is embedded in our concept of a shared past. Heritage is a unifying force which brings together communities across generational, ethnic and socio-economic divides.

Volunteering in the heritage sector is proven to improve one's overall mental health, and particularly to limit loneliness. Heritage volunteering represents 6% of all voluntary work undertaken in England. 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).

We believe that social prescribing has been proven to be particularly effective and think it could be a fantastic tool to dramatically increase the number of lonely people the heritage sector is able to involve in activities.

There are, moreover, numerous noteworthy projects run by heritage organisations that are exploiting heritage's capability to directly tackle loneliness.

Heritage Projects aimed specifically at Loneliness

Projects led by heritage groups specifically to tackle loneliness have produced many successful results some of which we detail below.

One such example is The UCL research project 'Museums on Prescription', used heritage to reduce feelings of loneliness. The project placed 115 lonely, isolated and elderly people, referred by local authorities and other organisations, in ten-week programmes in museums. 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.

A heritage aspect to projects tackling loneliness is particularly helpful, for it often provides and prompts memories of a pre-existing sense of community. Sue Gray, CEO of Suffolk Mind, in our 2017 debate 'Is Heritage good for your Health?', which you can listen to here, detailed a project by the mental health charity, in which they brought together old Ipswich dock workers. The older men, who were generally very isolated, created a very successful social group as a result of the project. Sue emphasised that the project had been such a success because the men were able to identify with one another, and find topics of conversation, due to their shared past.

Suffolk Mind and the Churches Conservation Trust [Alliance member] also restored the medieval church, St Mary at the Quay, into a Wellbeing Heritage Centre for everyone in the community. The stated aim for the project is to 'link the idea of well-being with our historic environment'. The restoration project brought the local community together to celebrate their shared heritage, encapsulated in the building. School children, a local artist, craftspeople and volunteers came together, for example, to create interpretation pieces, like a rope and knot board and timeline.

The national project, Men in Sheds, which brings together men to socialise while making and mending, also uses heritage to cement their community and provide a focus for their tasks. One group of 'shedders', for example, has taken up residence in Kingswood Heritage Museum, while Portsea's 'shed' have been making model tanks for the D-Day Museum.

The 'Point of Ayr Then and Now', project, centred on the former Point of Ayr colliery, the last deep pit in North Wales aims to keep the memory of the pit alive. One elderly gentleman recorded, said talking about the pit and volunteering on the project had lifted his spirits and 'brought him back to life'.

Many heritage-orientated projects successfully focus specifically on those who class themselves as mentally or physically disabled, a group often more vulnerable to feelings of isolation. The MOD-led 'Operation Nightingale', for example, aimed to rehabilitate injured veterans by involving them in archaeological projects, which require many of the same skills as soldiering. Speaking at our debate, Richard Osgood, the senior archaeologist, detailed how the project provided a new community for those who had been medically discharged from the army and who had therefore lost the sense of camaraderie which the armed forces provide.

The Restoration Trust's 'Human Henge' project brought together 32 people local to Stonehenge, living with mental health problems and on low income, to participate in fun, varied activities with curators, carers, support workers and artists. The project aimed to explore the unique sense of place around the monument, and how people react to this. Speaking of one of their adventures, one participant said 'It was a day of connections, connecting to new people, a new landscape and maybe in some ways to our ancestors'.

Heritage can also be particularly effective in bridging the gap between generations, for heritage belongs to everyone within a community, no matter their age. In the 2011 HLF report on the social impact of volunteering on an HLF funded project, 70% of volunteers stated that they 'increased' or 'significantly increased' their contact with older adults.

Some projects have targeted this intergenerational link specifically, with great success. Beamish the North of England Open Air Museum's HLF-funded project, 'Mining Memories', for example, gave training to former coalminers so that they could go in to village primary schools, close to old pits, to give first hand accounts of their experiences. The project has not only brought together young and old, but also encouraged a shared sense of place. More information is available in the HLF's report on the 'Social Impact of HLF-funded projects'.

The Benefits of Heritage Volunteering

Volunteering at a heritage site, even for a purpose other than socialising, is likely to reduce feelings of loneliness.

The positive impact of volunteering on one's mental health, and particularly on reducing loneliness, is well recorded. The 2011 Heritage Lottery Fund report on 'the social impact of volunteering in an HLF funded project (Yr 3)', for example, stated that 92% of volunteers had succeeded in meeting new people, and that 35% them 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.

The Benefits of living in, or visiting, a Heritage Environment

Simply being in a historic environment stimulates ideas of community and connectedness that can help to reduce loneliness. Scientific research carried out by the National Trust has found that natural and historic places have a powerful effect on all of us. In the 'Places that Make us report' the National Trust set out to understand the depth of people's connection with place. The report found 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.

The individual's special place created a sense of belonging; 86% described their place as being part of them and 58% agreed that they 'feel like I belong' when visiting this place. Moreover, 75% agree that they would like to pass on their love of their place to significant others, suggesting that place elicits a desire to share and communicate with others. Thus, the simple existence of special places, of which historic sites are a part, helps to limit feelings of isolation.

Q: We also want to know what has been tried and hasn't worked, or hasn't worked in a particular context. Thinking of any projects or initiatives that you feel have not been effective, why do you think this is and are there any ways you feel these could be improved?

Volunteering can have a large impact on reducing feelings of loneliness, as detailed in our response to the first question. Yet, while no demographic evidence exists for the sector as a whole, if the

[2009-11 HLF reports](#) are taken as representative, young people, and those who hold or held 'blue collar' occupations, are under-represented in the heritage volunteering sector; 43% of volunteers were over 60, while 79% of volunteers work, or worked in the three most highly skilled occupational groupings.

There have been missed opportunities to extend the benefits of heritage volunteering, to the widest possible audience. Non-statutory guidance for local authorities on the National Citizen Service, for example, published by DCMS in 2017, recommends making connections between local NCS providers and various local groups, but fails to mention heritage bodies which have extensive volunteering expertise as mentioned above.

Q: **We want to gain a deeper understanding of any difficulties organisations face in measuring and assessing the impact of their work on loneliness, to assess whether we can provide extra guidance and support.**
What are the main challenges you encounter when assessing the impact of your work on loneliness?

Many of the projects aimed specifically at tackling loneliness have successfully assessed the impact of their work through surveys and other qualitative methods. There has been little attempt by these projects to assess their work qualitatively, despite the existence of numerical mechanisms to measure loneliness. It is unclear whether it is a lack of funding, a lack of awareness, or a lack of understanding that dictates this trend. Government guidance on measuring and assessing the impact of work could make this process easier for organisations and make comparisons between projects easier.

More broadly, the heritage sector can struggle to assess its impact on reducing loneliness, because its influence can often be subtle and unnoticed. Heritage is therefore likely to have a bigger impact on reducing loneliness than has been captured.

Volunteering in heritage, for example, as discussed in our response to the first question, can greatly reduce feelings of isolation, but there have been limited studies to investigate this on a sector-wide basis. Moreover, as reducing isolation is rarely the principal aim of those volunteering or those employing volunteers, it is rarely measured in more specific studies.

Furthermore, the simple existence of well-maintained heritage sites creates a sense of place and community which can tackle loneliness, but this is very difficult to quantify or assess because the effect is often subtle or subconscious. Attempts to quantify this effect, such as the 2014 Simetrica study, which estimated the well-being value of visiting heritage sites to be equivalent to £1,646 per person per year, have tended to focus on well-being generally, rather than loneliness specifically. More studies, such as the National Trust's '[Places that Make us report',](#) are needed to effectively assess the impact the preservation of the historic environment has on people generally, and more specifically on loneliness.

Q: **We plan to develop a cross-government strategy that combines some policies that reduce the risk of loneliness across society and some that focus on reducing the risk at specific trigger points.**
Do you have any comments or suggestions on our proposed approach?

We would strongly support a cross-governmental strategy to tackle loneliness. In particular, we would welcome a close relationship with heritage initiatives, which we believe are an effective tool in limiting isolation because our shared heritage evokes such a strong sense of community and place. For more evidence regarding the contribution of the heritage sector to tackling loneliness, please see our response to the first question.

The new [Big Lottery 'Building Connections' Fund](#), which encourages organisations 'to join up with others locally' and does not exclude organisations from any specific sector from applying, is very welcome, and is a good example of a cross-sector approach.

In particular we would support greater interaction between Government services and the heritage sector in regard to volunteering. Volunteering is a fantastic tool for tackling loneliness; a [2011 Heritage Lottery Fund report](#), for example, stated that 92% of volunteers had succeeded in meeting new people. For more information on this, please see our response to the first question.

As set out above heritage volunteering represents 6% of all voluntary work undertaken in England, but there have been missed opportunities to promote these volunteering opportunities in the non-statutory guidance for local authorities on the National Citizen Service, for example.

Moreover, assuming the [2009-11 HLF reports](#) are representative, young people, minorities and those who hold or held 'blue collar' occupations are less likely to volunteer in the heritage sector. For more information on this, please see our response to the second question. While improvements have since been made, a more integrated approach between the Government and the heritage sector towards volunteering could facilitate a system that engaged individuals from the widest possible background, and therefore reduced feelings of isolation even more effectively.

Social prescribing presents an excellent mechanism to encourage more people to engage in heritage projects and volunteering, and therefore to increase both well-being generally and cohesion more specifically. 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 and the Government should ensure social prescribing of heritage volunteering is offered throughout the country.

The effectiveness of social prescribing was evidenced by UCL's research project ['Museums on Prescription'](#), in which participants referred to Museum projects experienced a quantifiable rise in well-being. For more information, please see our response to the first question.