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DR DESI GRADINAROVA is a Senior Policy Adviser (Wellbeing and Inclusion) at [Historic England](#) and Historic Environment Lead at the [National Academy for SP](#) (NASP). Dr Gradinarova has been working in heritage, research, education and policy for many years and is a passionate believer in the potential of heritage to bring people together and its crucial role in maintaining a vibrant and healthy society.

‘May the force of the past be with you: why heritage is good for the human mind and soul’.

I have the pleasure to talk to you about the wellbeing benefits around engaging with heritage. There is growing evidence for the wellbeing benefits for connecting to our historic environment. It is now widely known that connecting with historic environment increases self-awareness, and our feelings sense of belonging. It improves our brain health through learning and reminiscence and helps overcome loneliness and self-isolation.



Heritage & Wellbeing the evidence

Engaging in heritage-led activities can improve health and wellbeing

- Visitors to heritage sites, libraries or museums are more likely to report good mental and physical health than non-visitors
- Engagement with heritage has positive impacts on individual wellbeing, including outcomes such as increased confidence, social connectivity and life satisfaction.
- It also has positive effects on community wellbeing, including outcomes on social relationships, sense of belonging, pride of place, ownership and collective empowerment.



The annual survey, Heritage and Society, produced by Historic England as part of the [Heritage Counts](#) series in 2019, showed that engaging with, or living near heritage is associated with

high life satisfaction, and quality of life. The research highlighted the therapeutic effects of historic landscapes, and the importance of shared identity and connection. Visiting a heritage site is associated with increased rates in adult objective wellbeing, and with positive effects on community wellbeing, including outcomes of social relationships, a sense of belonging, pride of place, ownership and collective empowerment.

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I think it is important to talk about what is heritage, and what it means when we talk about heritage activities. Is it a visit to a historic house, a trip to the museum, volunteering at an archaeological dig, or going through you family archive? Well, it is all this and more. I would say that it is even more than that. We have buildings and sites, yes. But we also have historic landscapes, including hidden ones under the ground, intangible heritage, consisting of people's memories, stories and significant histories, which may transform the most humble church house or even a bench in the site. Heritage is all around us, and it belongs to all of us. At Historic England we try to encourage everyone to maintain good mental health and social connectivity through engaging with the historic environment. How can we do that?

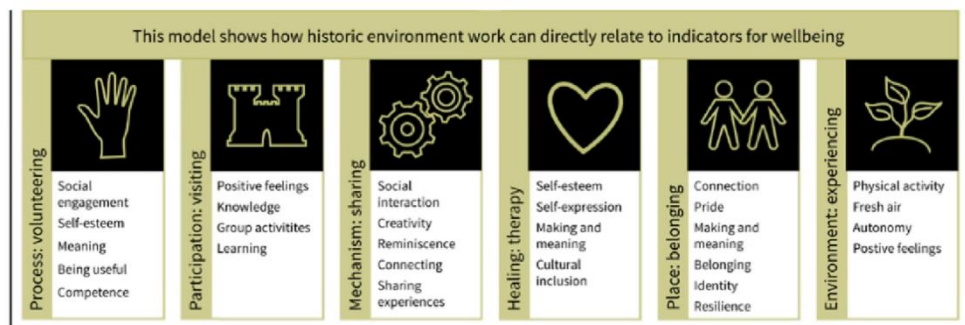
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What is Heritage?

- Heritage-based cultural activities in museums
- Heritage object handling in hospital, healthcare and related settings
- Visiting museums, historic houses, other heritage sites
- Heritage-based social engagement and inclusion projects
- Heritage volunteering
- Activities in historic landscapes and parks
- Community archaeology or community heritage research
- Living in historic places
- Wider social and economic impacts of historic places and assets

In 2018 we published our [Wellbeing and Historic Environment](#) assessment, which presented six routes to wellbeing through heritage. I'll just through a few of them. Heritage as:



- Process: volunteering is a great example there, as an active and committed relationship all the time, it is the process of being involved that promotes those wellbeing outcomes.
- Participation: visiting sites is the most popular form of engaging with the historic environment, and I mentioned some of the benefits connected with that.
- Mechanism: this is using heritage assets to bring people together for therapeutic or social purpose. Providing a common point of interest or experience, benefits can include social interaction, creating opportunities while memory and the sharing of experiences can contribute towards social cohesion.

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- Therapy: experimental assessments of patients on wards handling museum objects revealed benefits such as thinking and meaning making, self-esteem and increased confidence.
- Belonging: reclaiming a sense of place as a potential solution to social isolation. By engaging with the heritage of the places we live in, we also increase our feelings of pride, belongs and identity.
- The environment: after all, heritage is one whole things, including both the natural and the historical elements of it, and appreciating this all will help us reap the associated benefits in a holistic way.

People are emotionally connected to places. Historic England and National Trust carried out research in 2019, [Heritage and Society](#), which demonstrated that 75% of members of the public wanted to pass on their love of place to significant others. 92% agree that they would be upset if their meaningful place was lost. The research actually used MRI scanning and found that key areas of emotional processing in the brain are activated by places which are considered special by the individual which provide a deep connection.

The historic environment can also provide constancy, community wellbeing is high in places that offer a degree of constancy in the physical and social environment. Aspects that remain constant all the time can be reassuring in our fast paced and changing world, especially as we get older, where we may find it challenging to keep up. Evidence shows that specifically reminiscence activities can reduce withdrawal from daily life and improve cognitive function in patients with dementia. However, it is also suggested that sustained intervention may be necessary to maintain the effect over time.

This means that it is great to take action today, by visiting your local heritage site for example, but if you want long term positive effect on your mental health, it is even better if you connect with heritage on a regular basis, so getting a membership to a heritage organisation for example, or becoming a volunteer at a local heritage site, or joining your local history society.

Historic England actually supported one very original reminiscence project, led by Worcester City Council and the NHS Trust, called [Worcester Life Stories](#). By creating web platforms where people can access the wealth of historic photographs and maps contained within the local historic environment records, they can share their local knowledge, memories and images, and people in this way create and

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share their own life stories, which is especially beneficial for older people and those with dementia.

Another way to deliver wellbeing benefits of heritage is through SP pathways. Historic England started a partnership with NASP, by establishing a relationship and working alongside other arm length bodies to create a vision of SP infrastructure, and to promote SP projects, [SP and the potential of Historic England's local delivery](#) (2020). This is also part of Historic England's forthcoming heritage and wellbeing strategy, which supports mental health and work with older people as two of our four main priorities. The wider heritage sector have their own developing SP offers as well. You may have heard about [Museums on Prescription](#), there are community archaeology projects, sensory parks, heritage walks and even yoga classes in historic houses.

We can all benefit from a healthy dose of heritage and using the [Five Ways to Wellbeing](#), that you all very well know, we can use example to give a little prescription to ourselves today. So 'Connect' with your

local heritage, with inspirational people and places around you. 'Be active' go out there and explore what is outside, visit your local heritage site and parks, but also be active in asking questions to find out what activities there on offer are. 'Keep learning' keep your brain in top form and improve your mental abilities by learning more about the past, including your own.

Acquiring new skills and knowledge helps massively. 'Take notice' of what is around us, the historic environment is often in front of us, we just don't see it. Look up when you walk down the high street to appreciate the building on top of that shop, you will be amazed what you will see. Beyond the buildings and bridges, there lies another layer of our intangible heritage, the memories are the stories, including those unheard stories, forbidden stories, and hidden people, try noticing these, they will reveal much more about our own selves, and what we keep hidden.

Finally, 'Give', whether by volunteering or simply by giving some of your time to pass the stories to the next generation. It is the stories of our past which have the power to make us stronger and wiser, life is not always easy, as we have witnessed in the last year. It can be full of



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challenges and hardship, so we need that strength and that inspiration not just to survive and carry on, but to keep our humanity alive.

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