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Evidence Enquiry for Wellbeing and Heritage

Review of literature 2019-2024 and policy context

Dr Dilshaad Bundhoo, Clair Greenaway, Dr Demelza Jones, Dr Alan Marvell, Dr John Powell, Professor Paul Courtney

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Summary

The primary aim of the research project was to provide Historic England, the National Monuments Service, and the Heritage Council with a clear understanding of existing and emerging research which directly relates to improving wellbeing through heritage (the historic environment and archaeology). The study employed a Rapid Evidence Assessment (REA) and Quick Scoping Review (QSR) to systematically identify and appraise academic and grey literature from 2019–2024. Additionally, expert interviews, a sector-wide survey, and a stakeholder workshop provided qualitative insights. Thematic and content analysis techniques were used to synthesise data, ensuring a comprehensive evaluation of heritage's impact on wellbeing.

The research underscores heritage's significant role in mental health, social cohesion, and community identity. Heritage engagement fosters hedonic (happiness-based) and eudaimonic (meaning-based) wellbeing, particularly through community archaeology, cultural participation, and green heritage spaces. However, heritage remains underrepresented in public health policy due to inconsistent evaluation methods and fragmented funding. The study calls for sustainable funding models, cross-sector collaboration, and the development of sector-specific wellbeing indicators to better integrate heritage into national wellbeing strategies. Ultimately, the findings highlight the need for longitudinal research and policy recognition to ensure that heritage is positioned as a key contributor to individual and community wellbeing.

Contributors

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Date of research

Research was carried out between November 2025 and February 2025. The report was written in February 2025.

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Executive Summary

Heritage, both tangible and intangible, is a fundamental pillar of community identity and a powerful enabler of individual and collective wellbeing. Research increasingly affirms that heritage engagement fosters deep emotional, psychological, and social benefits, distinct from other cultural interventions. It strengthens place attachment, intergenerational connections, and a sense of belonging, all of which contribute to mental health, social cohesion, and overall quality of life.

Despite these demonstrable benefits, heritage remains marginalized within public health and wellbeing frameworks, with its impact often assessed using clinical-style metrics that fail to capture its holistic and long-term contributions. This report, commissioned to inform Historic England's strategic direction for 2025–2028 and Ireland's heritage policy priorities as detailed in Heritage Ireland 2030 , provides a comprehensive evaluation of the intersection between heritage and wellbeing, drawing on:

- A systematic review of academic and grey literature (2019–2024)
- Expert interviews with heritage and public health professionals
- A sector-wide survey and stakeholder workshop

Our findings underscore the urgent need for dedicated policy recognition, sustainable funding, and bespoke impact assessment methodologies that accurately reflect heritage's distinct contribution to wellbeing.

Key Findings

Unlike general creative arts participation, heritage engagement has the potential to foster deep connections to place, history, and community, providing a sense of continuity, belonging, and identity. Research highlights that heritage participation contributes to be hedonic (happiness-based) and eudaimonic (meaning-based) wellbeing, supporting mental health, intergenerational cohesion, and social capital formation. However, current evaluation models and policy frameworks do not adequately reflect heritage's role in wellbeing. The sector struggles with fragmented funding, short-term interventions, and the absence of relevant wellbeing indicators, which limits its ability to demonstrate impact and secure sustained investment.

Heritage as a wellbeing asset: a growing body of evidence

The relationship between heritage and wellbeing is increasingly recognized in interdisciplinary research. The Historic England Framework for Wellbeing and Heritage (2018) defines six themes—Heritage as Process, Participation, Mechanism, Healing, Place, and Environment —which illustrate the diverse ways in which heritage engagement contributes to wellbeing.

This research builds upon these principles, demonstrating that heritage participation fosters both hedonic (happiness-based) and eudaimonic (meaning-based) wellbeing, contributing to:

- **Psychological and Mental Health Benefits** – Reduced stress, anxiety, and depression through immersive engagement with heritage sites, cultural landscapes, and community history.
- **Social Wellbeing and Community Cohesion** – Strengthened social bonds, intergenerational exchange, and increased civic participation, particularly among marginalized and vulnerable groups.
- **Cultural Identity and Ontological Security** – A sense of continuity and stability in a rapidly changing world, particularly in areas with contested histories or shifting demographics.
- **Physical Wellbeing** – Increased outdoor activity, mobility, and physical engagement through interaction with heritage-rich landscapes and green spaces.
- **Economic and Regenerative Benefits** – Heritage-led regeneration projects contribute to place-making and sustainable tourism, fostering economic prosperity alongside social wellbeing.

However, despite this growing evidence base, consideration of the role played by heritage is often excluded from formal public health and social wellbeing policies, leaving its potential impact underutilised and undervalued.

Critical challenges in the evaluation and Implementation of heritage wellbeing initiatives

A lack of heritage-relevant wellbeing indicators remains one of the primary barriers preventing the integration of heritage into health and social policy. Current evaluation frameworks rely heavily on quantitative, clinical-style metrics that are not always appropriate to capture the complex and subjective nature of heritage's impact on wellbeing.

Key challenges include:

- **Inconsistent and inadequate wellbeing measurement tools** - Standard public health evaluation frameworks and outcome measures (e.g., SWEMWBS, PANAS) do not effectively assess the social, psychological, and emotional dimensions of heritage engagement.

- **Short-term funding models** - Many heritage wellbeing projects are constrained by short-term funding cycles, limiting the ability to measure long-term impact.

- **Disconnect between heritage and public health sectors** - A lack of structured collaboration between heritage professionals, psychologists, public health officials, and social scientists restricts opportunities for interdisciplinary best practice models.

- **Challenges in evaluating 'difficult heritage'** - While heritage is often framed as a positive wellbeing resource, contested or traumatic histories (e.g., colonial heritage, industrial decline, and post-conflict sites) require more nuanced approaches to measuring impact.

- **Lack of engagement with the broader diversity of communities** - Heritage wellbeing research lacks in depth engagement with diverse populations, meaning that much of the data tends to reflect older, white, middle-class demographics, limiting broader applicability.

Given these constraints, an emerging trend in heritage wellbeing research is the integration of mixed-methods approaches, combining standardised and bespoke wellbeing scales with qualitative, participatory evaluation techniques to provide a more comprehensive and context-sensitive analysis of impact. For example:

- The Places of Joy project (Gallou et al., 2022; Sofaer et al., 2021) adapted environmental restoration assessment tools to measure the restorative effects of heritage sites on visitors.
- Hoare (2020) combined biometric tracking (electrodermal activity monitors) with emotional mapping to assess visitors' affective responses to heritage settings.
- GIS-based studies (Macdonald et al., 2023) have linked heritage accessibility to spatial wellbeing inequalities, reinforcing the need for more inclusive heritage policies.

However, further work is needed to harmonise evaluation tools and embed sector-specific wellbeing indicators within national wellbeing policy frameworks.

Strategic Recommendations

Heritage has the potential to be a key driver of wellbeing, enhancing mental health, social inclusion, and community resilience. However, to fully realise this potential, the sector must move beyond short-term, fragmented initiatives towards a sustainable, evidence-based framework that integrates heritage into national health, social, and environmental policies.

This report outlines five strategic recommendations to strengthen heritage-led wellbeing initiatives through policy reform, research development, and cross-sector collaboration. These recommendations provide a roadmap for embedding heritage into public health and wellbeing strategies.

1. Enhance the sustainability and impact of Heritage-led Wellbeing initiatives

Heritage-led wellbeing projects often lack sustained investment, limiting their long-term impact. To maximise effectiveness, funding and evaluation models must be restructured to align with the unique characteristics of heritage engagement.

Key actions:

- Develop sector-specific wellbeing evaluation frameworks, incorporating qualitative and quantitative metrics to assess both immediate and long-term impact.
- Secure long-term funding streams by positioning heritage-based wellbeing initiatives within NHS and public health agency investment programs.
- Support heritage social prescribing models, ensuring archaeology, conservation, and historic site engagement receive consistent funding and evaluation.

Policy Impact: Establishes heritage as a long-term public health investment rather than a short-term cultural initiative.

2. Strengthen cross-sector collaboration for more effective wellbeing strategies

Heritage wellbeing research must be interdisciplinary, leveraging expertise from public health, psychology, social sciences, and urban planning. Structured partnerships will allow for co-created, sustainable wellbeing interventions.

Key actions:

- Develop heritage-health research clusters to study heritage’s impact on mental health and social inclusion.

- Facilitate interdisciplinary projects, integrating heritage specialists, healthcare providers, and social scientists to co-design best practice models.
- Establish local partnerships between heritage organizations and community health providers to develop targeted wellbeing interventions.

Policy Impact: Embeds heritage in interdisciplinary wellbeing policies, enhancing social and health integration.

3. Develop sector-specific wellbeing indicators for stronger policy recognition

Existing wellbeing research fails to capture heritage-specific impacts, leading to underrepresentation in public health policy. To address this, heritage-specific wellbeing metrics must be developed to evaluate engagement, identity formation, and community resilience.

Key Actions:

- Create heritage-specific wellbeing indicators, moving beyond generic mental health assessments.
- Develop evaluation toolkits for heritage professionals, allowing for systematic measurement of wellbeing benefits.
- Integrate Social Return on Investment (SROI) methodologies to quantify heritage's broader social and economic contributions.

Policy Impact: Positions heritage as a measurable, evidence-backed contributor to national wellbeing frameworks.

4. Prioritise longitudinal and participatory research to track impact over time

Most heritage wellbeing initiatives lack long-term impact assessments, making it difficult to demonstrate sustained benefits. Funding longitudinal studies will allow for a deeper understanding of heritage's role in mental health and social engagement.

Key actions:

- Conduct multi-year studies tracking heritage participants, analysing wellbeing outcomes over time.
- Implement follow-up evaluations at six-month and one-year intervals to measure emerging social and psychological benefits.

- Integrate community-led heritage documentation into national planning frameworks to ensure heritage voices shape wellbeing policy.

Policy Impact: Establishes heritage engagement as a long-term wellbeing strategy, increasing funding eligibility and program sustainability.

5. Embed Heritage Wellbeing interventions into National health and social prescribing pathways

To move beyond ad hoc heritage wellbeing projects, heritage must be formally recognised as a key contributor to mental health and social care strategies. By embedding heritage into social prescribing models, it can become a structured public health intervention.

Key actions:

- Establish formal partnerships between heritage organizations and primary healthcare providers to support heritage-based social prescribing.
- Develop policy guidelines for incorporating heritage wellbeing programs into national health and social strategies.
- Promote adaptive reuse of historic spaces as community wellbeing hubs, fostering mental health support and social cohesion.

Policy Impact: Ensures heritage wellbeing programs are integrated into national public health policy, strengthening sector-wide sustainability.

Strategic research priorities: short- and mid-term focus areas

To advance heritage-led wellbeing research, targeted short- and mid-term studies should focus on three key areas:

- Community Archaeology – Examining its potential as a social wellbeing intervention through active participation in excavation, conservation, and heritage education.
- Heritage and Mental Health – Evaluating the therapeutic benefits of heritage-based interventions, including museum object handling, storytelling, and historic site visits.

- Craftsmanship and Artisan Work – Investigating the role of heritage crafts in mental health, employment, and cognitive wellbeing.

Each area presents immediate research opportunities, including pilot studies that could generate high-impact data to support policy development.

Heritage is not only a cultural asset of the past—it is a vital tool for building healthier, more resilient communities. This research suggests that reform of funding structures, development of relevant evaluation frameworks, and integration of heritage into national wellbeing policy, can provide a blueprint for evidence-based policymaking that will shape the heritage and wellbeing agenda for 2025–2028 and beyond.

1. Introduction

Heritage, both tangible and intangible, plays a pivotal role in shaping community identity and individual wellbeing. Wellbeing is a vital framework for reframing the role of archaeology and the historic environment sectors, emphasizing their public value and capacity to generate significant social impacts, and enabling strategic planning for enhanced outcomes at both project and organisational levels (Monckton, 2022).

Historic England's 2022-2025 Wellbeing Strategy identifies wellbeing as a "threat multiplier" that, if left unaddressed, exacerbates inequality, poverty, and social unrest—ultimately undermining public health, national productivity, and security. Wellbeing is inherently complex, shaped by both objective social determinants and subjective personal experiences. The cultural heritage sector is uniquely positioned to address both aspects: by fostering community engagement, heritage can strengthen social determinants of wellbeing, while personal interactions with heritage can enhance individuals' subjective sense of purpose and emotional resilience. This is recognised in Ireland's national heritage policy, Heritage Ireland 2030.

Historic England's Framework for Wellbeing and Heritage (Reilly, Nolan and Monckton, 2018) outlined six key themes that illustrate how heritage intersects with wellbeing, offering diverse avenues for communities to engage with and benefit from their cultural and historical environments. These themes - Heritage as Process, Participation, Mechanism, Healing, Place, and Environment - underpin understanding of the multi-faceted relationship between heritage and wellbeing. They demonstrate how heritage initiatives can support social inclusion, mental health, and community cohesion through volunteering, cultural participation, shared experiences, and environmental interaction. As interest and awareness of the contribution heritage can make to societal wellbeing grows, particularly through social prescribing, heritage conservation, and community engagement, it is crucial to review current research trends to inform strategic policy development over the 2025-2028 period.

Wellbeing and heritage are increasingly interconnected areas of research and policy-making in the UK and Ireland, with both fields addressing social, economic, environmental, and cultural dimensions (Sayer, 2024). Based on current knowledge and trends, several key developments are likely to shape these areas in the future. In recent years, there has been a growing recognition of the importance of integrating wellbeing into the valuation of heritage, considering it not only as cultural capital but also as a significant contributor to social and economic outcomes. Investigating the impact of local cultural heritage density on individual wellbeing in England, Colwill's (2024) findings reveal a statistically significant, positive relationship between the density of local heritage assets and self-reported life satisfaction, after adjusting for various socio-economic, neighbourhood and regional effects. Heritage is increasingly being seen through the lens

of wellbeing, with work focusing on how it enhances the quality of life, particularly through digital innovations (Clark, 2021) and engagement with children and youth.

With advances in technology, digital and virtual heritage experiences are becoming more prevalent (e.g., augmented reality tours of historical sites) (Veliz Reyes et al., 2024; Scorolli et al., 2023). This allows wider access to heritage, particularly for those unable to visit in person, such as disabled people or those in remote locations. These experiences can promote learning, cultural connection, and emotional wellbeing. As Luck and Sayer (2024) suggest, these digital tools allow for more tailored heritage experiences, increasing the emotional and mental health benefits for diverse audiences by aligning with their personal histories or interests.

In addition to technological advancements, place-based learning initiatives have been shown to foster a deeper connection between individuals and their local heritage. Grimshaw and Mates (2022) explore how educational programs focused on local history in a former coalfield area in northeast England help children develop a strong sense of belonging and identity through their environment. Such initiatives highlight the role of heritage in promoting social cohesion, particularly when heritage education is linked to community identity and history.

Heritage tourism policies are also evolving, with a growing emphasis on ensuring that tourism activities contribute positively to the wellbeing of local communities. Brooks et al. (2023) advocate for more ethical and sustainable tourism practices that benefit local economies and support cultural preservation. By designing tourism strategies that prioritise residents' wellbeing, policy-makers can foster a more balanced approach that enhances both visitor experience and community prosperity.

Heritage sites with natural environments also contribute significantly to public health and wellbeing agendas. Sites that incorporate green or blue space, and promote biodiversity and encourage physical activity, relaxation, and connection to nature are increasingly recognised as valuable assets in public health (Kelly, 2018). Additionally, the adaptive re-use of heritage buildings as (for example) community centres, creative spaces, or housing contributes to urban regeneration while enhancing social wellbeing (Fouseki, Guttormsen and Swensen, 2019). This trend is likely to continue as part of broader sustainable development and placemaking efforts in the UK and Ireland, offering a way to harmonize heritage conservation with contemporary community needs.

Additionally, there is a need for more sophisticated ways to measure the impact of heritage on wellbeing, going beyond economic benefits. Policy-makers are starting to shift heritage funding models to prioritize projects that explicitly promote community wellbeing, mental health, and social inclusion (Clark, 2021). Current and future research (for example Tenzer and Schofield 2024) will focus on developing wellbeing indices specific to heritage, incorporating factors like emotional fulfilment, social cohesion, and mental health improvements.

This report aims to present an in-depth analysis of recent advancements in heritage and wellbeing research within the UK and Ireland, addressing Historic England's requirement for a comprehensive evaluation of current and emerging research trends. The findings will inform strategic planning for research initiatives and pilot projects, shaping the direction of evidence-based policymaking for the period 2025–2028. By synthesising recent innovations and identifying priority areas, this report seeks to contribute to the development of a robust, research-driven wellbeing and heritage strategy, ensuring improved community wellbeing outcomes through policies grounded in the latest academic and applied research. The content is based on the outcomes of review of academic and grey literature triangulated by an expert consultation for the systematic identification, appraisal, and synthesis of existing research on heritage and wellbeing within a limited timeframe (November 2024- February 2025).

2. Methodology

The primary aim of the research project was to provide Historic England, the National Monuments Service, and the Heritage Council with a clear understanding of existing and emerging research which directly relates to improving wellbeing through heritage (the historic environment and archaeology). To achieve this aim, the following objectives were agreed with HE.

1. Map and categorize completed and ongoing research produced in the last five years, focusing on public sector and academic outputs in the UK and Ireland.
2. Analyse key research trends and identify gaps to guide future work and funding priorities for improving the quality and deliverability of wellbeing outcomes through heritage.
3. Ensure wellbeing outcomes from the historic environment and archaeology are captured and understanding how evaluation is currently being approached.
4. Understand which organisations are funding such work as is covered by completed.
5. Understand which organisations are focusing current and future research in this expanding area and likely to become potential key partners for HE.

The Rapid Evidence Assessment (REA) and Quick Scoping Review (QSR) of academic and grey literature triangulated by an expert consultation for the systematic identification, appraisal, and synthesis of existing research on heritage and wellbeing within a limited timeframe (November 2024- February 2025) allowed for the identification, appraisal, and synthesis of existing research on heritage and wellbeing within a limited timeframe. Through a structured search protocol, iterative keyword refinement, systematic screening, and critical appraisal, this methodology ensured the inclusion of high-quality, policy-relevant evidence. The research was conducted in two phases: Phase One: Strategy development, and Phase Two: Data collection and analysis, with explicit steps taken to ensure consistency, replicability, and clarity throughout the process.

2.1. Phase One: Strategy Development

The research team collaborated with the steering group (Historic England, the National Monuments Service and Heritage Council) to finalise the research scope, and the design of the expert consultation process. This phase established the methodological framework to guide the review process. Particular attention was given to defining research priorities related to social inequalities, mental health, intergenerational benefits, and heritage-led wellbeing initiatives. A systematic search protocol was developed based on Historic

England's six heritage themes and corresponding wellbeing objectives. The protocol included:

- Clear definitions of inclusion and exclusion criteria to maintain consistency.
- An iterative strategy for keyword refinement, ensuring comprehensive coverage of relevant literature.
- Structured documentation templates for systematic screening, extraction, and synthesis.

An initial set of search terms was compiled, incorporating concepts such as integrated health pathways, social prescribing, and intangible heritage. Additional terms related to climate change, cultural capital, and place-based wellbeing were also included. Iterative refinements were made based on feedback from first literature searches in Scopus and Google scholar. All methodological steps were carefully documented to facilitate replication and future updates.

2.2. Phase Two: Data Collection and Analysis

This phase was conducted between mid-November 2024 and mid-January 2025, encompassing a systematic process of literature identification, screening, extraction, and synthesis. The research team utilised academic databases, grey literature repositories, and targeted web searches to collate a comprehensive body of evidence.

2.2.1. Stage One: Review of published work

A structured literature search was conducted using Scopus and Google scholar to identify peer-reviewed academic literature. Targeted searches were performed on government and heritage organisation websites, including the Department of Culture, Media, and Sport (DCMS) and the Joint Committee of the National Amenity Societies to locate grey literature and research outputs not indexed in the scientific databases.

The search strategy was designed to ensure comprehensive and methodologically rigorous identification of relevant literature. An iterative approach was employed to refine search terms, optimise search queries, and apply appropriate filtering criteria, thereby enhancing the precision and relevance of retrieved studies. The initial set of keywords was developed based on established heritage and wellbeing frameworks. These terms were refined throughout the search process, informed by preliminary findings and expert feedback, to enhance the breadth and depth of coverage. Boolean operators (AND, OR) were systematically utilised to refine search expressions, ensuring optimal retrieval of relevant studies. For example, queries such as "Heritage AND Wellbeing" OR "Social Prescribing" were employed to capture interdisciplinary perspectives. To maintain rigour and relevance, search results were restricted according to the following parameters:

a) Studies published within the last five years (2019–2024) were prioritised to ensure the inclusion of the most recent evidence.
b) The review focused exclusively on research pertaining to the United Kingdom and Ireland, including devolved nations, to ensure contextual applicability.
c) Only English-language publications were considered to maintain consistency in analysis and interpretation.

A set of inclusion and exclusion criteria was applied to ensure the methodological robustness and relevance of selected studies.

Inclusion criteria:

a) Peer-reviewed academic research produced by UK and Irish institutions.
b) Grey literature published by professional heritage associations, government agencies, and recognised charities contributing to the heritage and wellbeing discourse.

Exclusion criteria:

a) Research conducted or commissioned by private sector organisations, unless affiliated with a recognised academic or governmental entity.
b) Studies focused on non-UK and non-Irish contexts, including those conducted by organisations outside the specified geographic scope.

This approach ensured that the final body of evidence was rigorously selected, methodologically sound, and directly relevant to the objectives of this research.

A systematic approach was applied to screen and extract relevant data from the identified studies. During the initial screening, titles and abstracts were reviewed to quickly exclude irrelevant studies, and the inclusion and exclusion criteria were applied to maintain consistency. Studies that passed the initial screening underwent full-text review to confirm relevance, methodological rigor, and thematic alignment with the project objectives. Extracted data were documented in a structured evidence map using Excel. The following fields were recorded:

- Bibliographic details: Title, author, publication year, and study type.
- Methodological details: Research design (qualitative/quantitative), data collection and analysis methods.
- Heritage and wellbeing themes: Thematic focus and relevance to Historic England’s objectives.

- Key findings

Given the bulk of the studies reviewed, mainly papers and grey literature referencing heritage-led projects were prioritised for the data entry into the Excel database. The quality of studies was appraised by the methodological robustness and relevance based on alignment with heritage and wellbeing, ensuring that only the most robust and policy-relevant findings informed the synthesis and recommendations.

Understanding the research landscape (objectives 4 and 5)

To comprehensively map the landscape of heritage-led wellbeing research and practice it was essential to characterise both the organisations currently funding such initiatives and key institutions driving present and future research in this expanding field, thereby identifying potential strategic partners for Historic England. A scoping exercise identified organisations and individuals actively contributing to heritage and wellbeing research. This activity included:

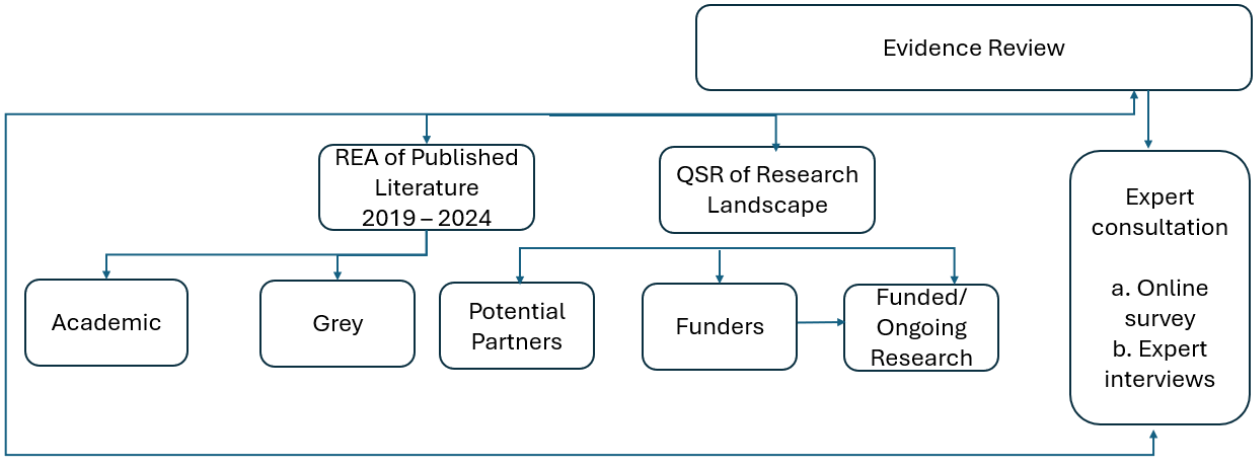
- A review of existing collaborative work, projects, and research outputs;
- Examination of HE's past and ongoing partnerships has revealed recurring collaborators and areas of shared interest;
- developing a list of organisations and individuals to interview from conference proceedings;
- a review of strategic initiatives and funded projects from government (UK and Ireland) and international organisations leading heritage research such as the UNESCO World Heritage Centre and ICOMOS UK.

Public and third-sector organisations are central to heritage practice and policy implementation. Identifying organisations such Historic Environment Scotland, Historic Wales, the Historic Environment Division (HED) of Northern Ireland's Department for Communities (DfC) and the Heritage Council of Ireland as key stakeholders ensures alignment with institutional and national priorities. In addition, NGOs and charities such as the National Trust and the Council for British Archaeology are crucial for bridging research, practice, and community engagement.

In addition, an analysis of academic publications in peer-reviewed journals has highlighted researchers and institutions that have published on wellbeing and heritage themes. For published academic research, databases such as Scopus and Google Scholar have been instrumental in identifying authors, organisations, and the geographic distribution of research activity. Key institutions in the UK include University College London (UCL), the University of York, and the University of Cambridge, all of which have established expertise in heritage and wellbeing research. In Ireland, Trinity College Dublin and University College Dublin are recognised leaders in this area.

For ongoing research, publicly accessible databases such as the UKRI Gateway to Research and project reports were utilised. We reviewed grants awarded by key funding bodies such as the UK Research and Innovation Councils (UKRI), including the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) and the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), as well as the National Lottery Heritage Fund. For EU-funded heritage projects under Horizon Europe, we used CORDIS (EU Research Projects). Recipients of significant funding were identified with a focus on their research themes, outputs, and collaborative activity. Figure 1 provides an overview of the evidence collections approaches in Phase 2.

Figure 1 Overview of evidence collection approaches in Phase 2



2.2.2. Stage 2: Expert consultation

Primary data capture took place in January – February 2025 and engaged three field expert groups – academic researchers (SCI), heritage practitioners (PRAC) and policy actors (POL). Expert consultation was undertaken through three approaches:

1. Interviews

8 interviews were undertaken with key informants from each identified stakeholder group. The aim of the interviews was to collect expert's insights of wellbeing and heritage research.

2. Questionnaires

A questionnaire was developed for each of the groups – policy actors, academic researchers and practitioners. The rationale for designing three separate questionnaires for practitioners, policymakers, and researchers stems from their distinct roles, perspectives, and contributions to heritage-led wellbeing initiatives. Each group interacts with these projects differently, faces unique challenges, and requires tailored questions to capture meaningful insights. Questionnaires were distributed through the networks of the

steering group and research team from 23 January – 12 February 2025. In terms of questionnaire completion, 7 academic researchers, 26 heritage practitioners and 10 policy stakeholders engaged in the activity.

3. Workshop discussion

On 11 February, a 1.5-hour workshop was conducted with 31 heritage practitioners representing a range of organizations, aiming to explore the role of heritage projects in creating social value within vulnerable communities.

The workshop built on prior research and practitioner engagement to examine how heritage initiatives contribute to social inclusion, wellbeing, and community resilience. Key discussions centred on effective interventions, such as heritage education, community arts, and accessibility initiatives, and the challenges practitioners face, including funding constraints, community engagement barriers, and the absence of relevant evaluation frameworks. Participants reflected on the need for robust impact assessment tools to better demonstrate the benefits of heritage-led initiatives to policymakers and funders. A significant focus of the workshop was the policy environment shaping heritage-based social impact, with discussions highlighting the need for greater cross-sector collaboration with health, education, and social services. Practitioners identified long-term investment strategies, clearer policy frameworks, and stronger advocacy mechanisms as critical to enhancing the sustainability of heritage-led wellbeing projects. The workshop facilitated a knowledge exchange that not only captured on-the-ground challenges and successes but also informed broader policy recommendations and future research. These insights contribute to the ongoing discourse on heritage as a resource for social development, emphasizing its potential to address systemic social inequalities.

2.2.3. Data analysis

Data analysis utilised a rigorous and multi-faceted approach to improving understanding of heritage-led wellbeing initiatives. Initially, the findings from the literature review were systematically examined to identify the research methods, wellbeing outcomes, and indicators commonly used in existing studies. This phase of the work also highlighted key evaluation challenges, innovative approaches, and gaps in the field, shedding light on underexplored areas that require further research. To enhance the depth and reliability of findings these insights were cross-referenced and validated through expert interviews and an online survey. By engaging with specialists across the heritage and wellbeing sectors, we gained a more contextualized understanding of the practical challenges and successes experienced in implementing such initiatives. This triangulation of data ensured that our analysis was not solely dependent on published literature but was also informed by first-hand accounts from those actively working in the field.

Further reinforcing the robustness of our findings, we integrated data collected from an expert workshop. This provided a platform for experts to share real-world experiences, discuss common sectoral challenges, and validate the themes emerging from both the literature review and interviews. The workshop also allowed for collaborative reflection on

the complexities of evaluating wellbeing impacts, particularly in relation to intangible heritage and social prescribing models.

By synthesising these multiple sources of evidence, the analysis offers a comprehensive and grounded perspective on the current state of heritage-led wellbeing initiatives. By combining literature-based insights with expert perspectives and sector-wide reflections, we mitigated potential biases and limitations inherent in any single source of data. This approach also allowed us to uncover synergies between ongoing and completed research, enhancing the potential for our findings to contribute to both theoretical advancements and policy development. By integrating diverse viewpoints and methodologies, the analysis aims to provide a solid foundation based on empirical evidence and lived experience to support development of more effective, inclusive, and sustainable wellbeing interventions.

3. Evidence Review: Literature and Expert Consultation

3.1. Understanding the state of the art in wellbeing and heritage

The literature was reviewed within Historic England's *Heritage and Wellbeing* framework where Heritage functions to enhance social connection, reduce social isolation, and foster a sense of belonging and identity. Heritage is positioned not just as a passive historical record but as an active driver of social capital, wellbeing, and inclusivity. The studies demonstrate that heritage engagement—whether through participation in community projects, visiting historic sites, or engaging in heritage conservation efforts—contributes to individual and collective wellbeing by reinforcing a sense of place, history, and community. The themes analysed within the literature review focus on the social and psychological benefits of heritage participation. Heritage environments serve as social infrastructure, providing spaces for community gatherings, intergenerational connections, and the fostering of civic pride. The therapeutic effects of heritage engagement are also highlighted, with research showing positive impacts on mental health, stress reduction, and social resilience. At the same time, barriers to heritage access and participation—such as demographic inequalities, economic constraints, and the risk of heritage-led exclusion—are also discussed.

A key trend emerging from the research is the growing recognition of heritage's role in wellbeing-based policymaking. There is increasing interest in using heritage sites and activities as tools for social prescribing, community building, and mental health interventions. Additionally, the impact of digital heritage participation (especially following the COVID-19 pandemic) is explored, revealing both opportunities for broader accessibility and the ongoing importance of physical, place-based engagement with heritage. In sum, heritage is no longer viewed purely as a historical and cultural asset—it is an active, dynamic force for social wellbeing, capable of bridging past, present, and future community needs.

In the following sections, we provide a comprehensive analysis of the definitional issues, research methods, wellbeing outcomes, how research has tried to measure/evaluate/assess wellbeing outcomes; and the challenges and limitations that have been identified. We also reflect on research gaps and future research opportunities, drawing on published studies, evaluation reports, and the field expert interviews and survey responses carried out by this project.

3.1.1. Definitional issues with heritage and wellbeing

Heritage and wellbeing are inherently difficult to define, yet both concepts carry meaningful personal and community impacts that extend beyond simple economic or policy-driven frameworks. Heritage is not just about historic sites and artifacts, but also

about the emotional, psychological, and social connections people develop with places, traditions, and cultural practices. Similarly, wellbeing is not solely about happiness or life satisfaction, but includes social cohesion, identity formation, and mental resilience—elements that are often shaped by heritage experiences.

One of the primary challenges in exploring the relationship between heritage and wellbeing is the lack of a clear, consensus in the definition for both concepts within research and policy discourse. Heritage is multifaceted. It can refer to tangible aspects such as historic buildings, parks, and archaeological sites, or intangible cultural elements like traditions, identities, and social practices (Gallou, 2022). This diversity in definition makes it difficult to consistently measure its impact on wellbeing. Similarly, wellbeing is often narrowly defined in policy literature through subjective wellbeing metrics (such as happiness and life satisfaction) that do not fully capture the broader mechanisms at play in heritage experiences (Thomson et al., 2018).This concern is echoed in the wider literature, where researchers argue that current wellbeing frameworks focus too much on short-term emotional responses, rather than longer-term, community-based, and eudaimonic wellbeing outcomes. The narrow focus on immediate psychological benefits risks overlooking the identity formation, place attachment, social capital, and environmental perceptions that arise from heritage engagement (Historic England, 2019, 2020).

Our research findings suggest a disconnect between heritage practitioners and wellbeing researchers which, according to most of the field experts interviewed within this study, has led to fragmented approaches, making it difficult to integrate findings into policy and planning strategies. For instance, Interviwee07, a researcher working on heritage-led wellbeing interventions, criticises the lack of interdisciplinary collaboration in measuring wellbeing:

> "Archaeologists are very good at archaeology. They are not social scientists. There is a huge chasm between the two skill sets" (Interviewee07, Feb 2025).

The issue is further complicated by variability in terminology. Different actors —urban planners, mental health researchers, cultural policymakers—interpret ‘heritage’ and ‘wellbeing’ differently, leading to inconsistencies in evidence and evaluation methods (Afshar et al., 2017).

Despite these challenges, place attachment and social wellbeing have been identified as two crucial mechanisms through which heritage contributes to health outcomes. Studies suggest that stronger connections to historic places can promote psychological stability, self-esteem, and safety perceptions, all of which have indirect links to public health improvements (Larson, 1996; Rollero & De Piccoli, 2010). However, these dimensions of wellbeing remain underexplored in mainstream policy frameworks, which focus predominantly on economic and tourism-driven narratives of heritage value(Gallou, 2022; Gallou, Uzzell and Sofaer, 2022; Gallou and Fouseki, 2019; Gallou and Fouseki, 2018).

3.1.2. Wellbeing outcomes

The body of research published between 2019 and 2024 provides a comprehensive and multi-dimensional exploration of wellbeing outcomes associated with engagement with the historic environment. Across disciplines, heritage-related activities have been shown to contribute to mental, social, emotional, and physical wellbeing, with both direct and indirect benefits. These outcomes are observed across various forms of participation, from visiting heritage sites to community-led initiatives and structured interventions. The research also highlights hedonic (happiness-based) and eudaimonic (meaning-based) wellbeing outcomes, emphasizing how heritage supports a sense of identity, belonging, and stability in people's lives.

1. Psychological and mental health benefits

A recurring theme in the literature is the positive impact of heritage on mental wellbeing, particularly in reducing stress, anxiety, and depression. Studies show that interactions with natural and historic environments promote emotional regulation and cognitive resilience (Dobson et al., 2021; Macdonald et al., 2023). For example, green spaces and historic landscapes have been found to alleviate mental health conditions by enhancing mood, providing a sense of continuity, and promoting environmental connectedness (Gallou, 2022; Richardson et al., 2021).

Several studies explore heritage-based therapeutic interventions, particularly in mental health programs (Heaslip et al., 2020). Heritage engagement has been used to support individuals with dementia (Innes et al., 2021), post-traumatic stress disorder (Dobat et al., 2020), and long-term mental ill-health (Darvill et al., 2019). Additionally, museum object handling and archaeological participation have been found to provide psychological relief and cognitive stimulation, supporting positive emotions and reminiscence therapy (Pennington et al., 2019; Burnell et al., 2024).

2. Social wellbeing: community cohesion and social capital

Heritage fosters social wellbeing by strengthening social ties, promoting intergenerational connections, and enhancing social inclusion. Research highlights how heritage spaces serve as social infrastructures, where people meet, interact, and build relationships (Beele & Wallace, 2023; Mullan, 2021). Heritage engagement has been particularly beneficial for vulnerable and marginalized groups, including older adults, asylum seekers, and individuals experiencing social isolation (Ainsworth et al., 2019; Macdonald et al., 2023).

Participatory heritage projects, such as community archaeology and oral history initiatives, are shown to empower local populations by fostering pride, identity, and collective memory (Beel & Wallace, 2020; Brownlee et al. 2024; Nayak, 2019). In post-conflict settings, such as Northern Ireland, heritage-based programs have played a role in reconciliation and community-building, bridging divides between historically opposing groups (Crooke & Maguire, 2018; Mullan 2021).

Volunteering in heritage settings is also recognized as a significant contributor to social wellbeing, providing opportunities for skill-building, confidence development, and civic engagement (Pattinson et al., 2023; McHale et al., 2020). Volunteering can support self-worth and collective responsibility, particularly among older adults, by offering opportunities for lifelong learning and continued participation in community life (Phillips, 2019).

3. Cultural and existential wellbeing: identity, belonging, and meaning

Heritage participation is widely associated with eudaimonic wellbeing, which refers to a person's sense of meaning, purpose, and identity. Research highlights how heritage provides ontological security, offering stability and continuity in a rapidly changing world (Sofaer et al., 2021; Nolan, 2019). This is particularly evident in studies of pre-historic landscapes and archaeological sites, where individuals express a deep connection to the past and a sense of being rooted in history.

The Places of Joy project (Sofaer et al., 2021) found that heritage visits provided comfort during the COVID-19 pandemic, as familiar and historic spaces offered a sense of normality and emotional grounding amidst social disruptions. This aligns with Grenville's (2007) theory of heritage as a source of ontological security, wherein historic sites provide a bridge between past and present, situating the self within 'deep time' (Nolan, 2019).

Studies also emphasize the role of heritage in strengthening cultural identity. Research in rural Scottish communities highlights how local heritage practices and traditional storytelling strengthen community identity and pride (Beel & Wallace, 2020). Similarly, in urban contexts, place-based heritage projects help counteract territorial stigmatization and offer alternative narratives of place and history (Nayak, 2019).

4. Physical wellbeing: heritage, activity, and outdoor engagement

Heritage sites, particularly those integrated with green spaces and natural landscapes, contribute to physical health and fitness by encouraging walking, exploration, and outdoor activities (Dobson et al., 2021; Macdonald et al., 2023). Historic environments promote active lifestyles, particularly in walkable heritage-rich urban areas, which support public health through mobility and social interaction (Gallou, 2022).

Participatory archaeological fieldwork and conservation projects also have physical benefits, as they involve active engagement, manual work, and prolonged outdoor exposure (Darvill et al., 2019). Research on heritage-based physical activity programs suggests that engagement with historic landscapes contributes to both physical and mental wellbeing, fostering a sense of accomplishment and connection to place (Richardson et al., 2021).

5. Wellbeing Inequalities: access to heritage and barriers to participation

While the benefits of heritage engagement are well-documented, research also acknowledges structural inequalities in access to heritage experiences. Studies highlight

that heritage participation varies across demographic and socioeconomic groups, with disparities observed in heritage access, density, and funding allocation (Macdonald et al., 2023).

For example, low-income urban areas often have fewer heritage resources, limiting opportunities for engagement. Macdonald et al. (2023) suggest subsidized transport initiatives and digital heritage programs as potential solutions to address geographical disparities. There are also differences between urban and rural areas, with rural areas less likely to benefit from the non-use value of historic environment density (Colwill 2024). However, work by, for example, Beele and Wallace (2020; 2023) reports wellbeing benefits of engagement with rich community heritage in rural and remote regions, and emphasises the importance of recognition of and support for grassroots and community-led heritage activity in rural areas, or in other places where more formalised heritage infrastructure is absent or not easily accessible. Digital engagement with heritage, while offering wider accessibility, is also noted as a supplementary rather than a primary alternative to in-person participation (Luck & Sayer, 2024).

6. Personal fulfilment and lifelong learning

Heritage participation offers opportunities for self-improvement, intellectual stimulation, and lifelong learning. Museums, archives, and historic sites provide educational experiences that support cognitive engagement and creativity (Burnell et al., 2024). Research suggests that engaging with history fosters curiosity, problem-solving skills, and cultural literacy, contributing to personal fulfilment and intellectual wellbeing (Grossi, Tavano Blessi & Sacco, 2019).

Community-based heritage projects also foster self-empowerment, allowing individuals to take ownership of their histories and contribute to knowledge production (Twells et al., 2018). This process is particularly significant in historically marginalized communities, where reclaiming and documenting heritage serves as a form of cultural resistance and identity validation (Ashley, 2020).

7. Nuances in intention

According to one Interviewee (Feb 2025), it is key to understand heritage-led vs. wellbeing-led approaches. Initially, archaeology-led projects were not designed for wellbeing, but participants experienced strong social and mental health benefits. She contended that wellbeing-led heritage projects can be less effective for several reasons. Firstly, participants may come with expectations, which can impact their experience. Second, professionals often lack mental health training, leading to unrealistic goals. finally, in archaeology unexpected wellbeing outcomes may emerge through social bonding (e.g., teamwork in digs), outdoor activity, physical work, discovery and cognitive engagement.

Likewise, Interviewee03 (Feb 2025) notes the necessary distinction between intended and unintended wellbeing outcomes. Heritage projects often have unintended wellbeing benefits, but projects explicitly designed for wellbeing have structured and pre-defined

evaluation frameworks. The difference lies in intentionality and evaluation. In heritage-led projects, wellbeing is a byproduct but not the main goal while in wellbeing-led projects, wellbeing is the primary focus and is evaluated from the start.

Experts (interviewee03 and 04, Feb 2025) underline that while projects with wellbeing goals require clear evaluation frameworks, methodologies need to allow for the capture and study of unintended wellbeing benefits should they arise.

3.1.3. Research methods and wellbeing indicators

Research on heritage and wellbeing has employed a diverse range of methodological approaches, reflecting the multifaceted nature of the field and the wide-ranging contexts in which heritage operates, as well as the range of means by which wellbeing outcomes may be measured and assessed. Across studies published between 2019 and 2024, researchers have utilised qualitative, quantitative, and mixed-methods approaches, often incorporating innovative and participatory techniques to capture the lived experiences of individuals and communities. These methodologies reflect an increasing emphasis on community-based, participatory, and interdisciplinary research, aiming to measure both the tangible and intangible benefits of heritage engagement. Wellbeing assessments in heritage research draw upon a diverse range of indicators, reflecting various theoretical frameworks, methodological approaches, and study contexts.

1. Qualitative research: Exploring the depth of experience

A qualitative research approach is prevalent across heritage and wellbeing academic studies and project evaluations, particularly in studies/evaluations examining heritage as a mechanism for fostering wellbeing, or for studies producing detailed insights from small sample groups as a specific heritage site or sites, or from participants in a heritage project or intervention. Such studies frequently use interviews, ethnographic research, and participatory methods to explore how individuals and communities interact with heritage and the wellbeing outcomes this brings.

Interviews have been central to many studies, particularly those examining the perspectives of heritage programme managers, archaeologists, and community participants. For instance, Mullan (2021) conducted semi-structured interviews with programme managers to assess community wellbeing impacts of the National Lottery Heritage Fund’s Landscape Partnership Scheme. Similarly, Beel and Wallace (2023; 2020), Gallou (2019), and Twells et al. (2019) employed community interviews and discussions in places where heritage sites or projects were taking place, generating insights into social cohesion, identity formation, and community wellbeing.

Ethnographic and participant observation methods have been employed to capture in-depth, insider perspectives. Beel and Wallace (2023; 2020) incorporated researcher collaboration in heritage initiatives, allowing an immersive examination of how communities engage with their local histories.

Community-Based Participatory Research (CBPR) approaches have also gained traction. Bowden et al. (2025), for example, used the photovoice method, where participants were asked to take photographs of places that held personal significance or fostered a sense of belonging. These images were then used as stimuli for collective reflection and discussion, providing rich, community-driven narratives of heritage value.

While standardised scales offer comparability, qualitative approaches provide contextual insights into how people perceive and articulate the wellbeing benefits of heritage engagement. These studies often develop study-specific themes, reflecting the ways in which respondents frame their wellbeing experiences in relation to the particular heritage sites(s) or projects under analysis. While these self-reported frameworks may provide richer descriptions, they are more challenging to quantify or compare across different settings or audience groups. Some examples of approaches taken within the studies reviewed are given below:

Thematic frameworks for wellbeing assessment:

- Innes et al. (2021) categorized wellbeing benefits into:
    1. Enjoyment and engagement
    2. Connecting and learning
    3. Place, space, and time – with the latter highlighting the unique qualities of heritage settings in fostering wellbeing.
- Historic Environment Scotland (2019) classified heritage wellbeing outcomes into:
    1. Emotional responses
    2. Intellectual responses
    3. Connection and belonging
- The Human Henge project (Heaslip et al., 2020) identified four core wellbeing themes:
    1. Feeling connected
    2. Being yourself
    3. Challenging yourself
    4. Mental health wellbeing

Heritage and the ‘Five Pathways to Wellbeing’ framework:

- Sayer (2024) evaluated heritage site participation against the New Economics Foundation's (NEF) Five Pathways to Wellbeing, finding that most sites encouraged visitors to:
    1. *Take notice* (be present and mindful)
    2. *Connect* (build relationships and social ties)
    3. *Keep learning* (engage in curiosity and new experiences)
- However, they pointed that fewer heritage sites supported *being active*, and none explicitly encouraged *giving*, raising important questions about how heritage programs might better facilitate these additional wellbeing dimensions.

2. Quantitative approaches: Measuring wellbeing impacts

While qualitative methods provide depth, quantitative studies have been essential in measuring wellbeing outcomes associated with heritage engagement and offer comparability to the evidence in the wider wellbeing research field. Large-scale survey data, regression analysis, and experimental studies have been used, and secondary data analysis has played a significant role in establishing correlations between heritage engagement and wellbeing outcomes. For instance, Colwill (2024) conducted a regression analysis of the non-use benefits of local heritage density, using data from the Understanding Society Survey, which includes 25,000 individual responses across more than 10,000 Lower Super Output Areas (LSOAs) in England, and Mak et al. (2021) and MacDonald et al. (2023) utilised UK Household Longitudinal Study (UKHLS) data to demonstrate a positive association between cultural asset exposure and subjective wellbeing. These studies analysed variables such as heritage space exposure, green space availability, and the English Indices of Multiple Deprivation (EIMD) to assess how access to heritage correlates with mental health and life satisfaction.

Survey-based studies are also prevalent, particularly in studies assessing the impact of heritage participation on individual wellbeing. Many projects implemented pre- and post-participation surveys to measure changes in wellbeing outcomes, including Gallou et al. (2022), Heaslip et al. (2020), Innes et al. (2021), Luck and Sayer (2024), and Sofaer et al. (2021). Other studies, such as Gallou et al. (2022), used factor analysis to identify key attributes of heritage sites that contributed most to wellbeing, distinguishing between physical, aesthetic, and community-based factors.

Experimental and biometric approaches have been used to measure emotional and physiological responses to heritage settings. Hoare (2020) adopted an innovative mixed-method approach, equipping visitors to a historic house in South Wales with wearable electrodermal activity (EDA) monitors to track emotional responses. The study combined

objective physiological data with self-reported emotional feedback, revealing how different routes through a heritage site influenced visitors' emotional engagement.

Many studies employ self-reported wellbeing measures, either drawing from large-scale existing datasets or implementing tailored survey instruments for specific heritage settings.

Large-Scale Wellbeing Surveys:

- Colwill (2024) utilised data from the UK Household Longitudinal Survey to analyse the relationship between LSOA-level heritage density and self-reported life satisfaction at a national scale.
- Mak et al. (2021) and Macdonald et al. (2023) used the UK Household Longitudinal Survey (UKHLS) to investigate how exposure to historic environments correlates with subjective wellbeing and mental health.

Validated Wellbeing Scales in Heritage Research:

- The Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale (SWEMWBS) has been adapted for use in heritage projects, such as in the evaluation of the Human Henge project, which engaged participants with archaeological sites to improve mental health (Heaslip et al., 2020).
- The Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (PANAS) was employed by Luck and Sayer (2024) to measure emotional responses to heritage site visits, alongside the Modified Wellbeing Scale (MWS), which assesses life satisfaction, happiness, and connectedness.
- The Office for National Statistics (ONS) Wellbeing Measure, widely used in policy research, has been incorporated into Historic Environment Scotland’s (2019) evaluation framework, helping establish a standardised approach to heritage-related wellbeing assessment.
- Reece et al. (2022) explored Virtual Reality heritage experiences, using the State-Trait Anxiety Inventory (STAI) and the University of Wales Institute of Technology Mood Adjective Check List (UWIST MACL), alongside EEG data to measure stress and relaxation levels on exposure to virtual representations of heritage environments

Statistical analysis techniques have also offered useful insights, particularly in multi -site studies or in studies working with different audience groups. The *Places of Joy* project (Gallou et al. 2022) used factor analysis to compare seven heritage destinations, evaluating their physical, aesthetic, and social attributes and their influence on visitor wellbeing. The findings emphasized that engagement with both the physical and emotional aspects of a heritage site yielded the greatest wellbeing benefits. Sayer (2024) also took a comparative approach by comparing survey data across varied heritage sites, demonstrating that archaeological sites, smaller historical buildings, and urban sites had the most significant wellbeing impact, while Pomfret et al.'s (2023) work used survey data to compile a visitor typology among older heritage visitors, allowing comparison across motivations and perceived benefits of heritage visits.

3. Mixed-methods research: Bridging qualitative and quantitative approaches

Given the complexity of measuring heritage's impact on wellbeing, an emerging trend in heritage wellbeing research is the integration of mixed-methods approaches, which combine standardised wellbeing scales with qualitative, participatory evaluation techniques. Studies demonstrate the complementary insights into the role of heritage that can be gained by combining quantitative and qualitative research methods. For example, Colwill's (2024) large-scale quantitative study establishes a broad correlation between heritage density and life satisfaction, demonstrating that areas with a greater number of listed buildings tend to have higher reported wellbeing among residents. However, while this statistical relationship is valuable evidence for policy-making and urban planning, it does not explain *why* or *how* heritage exerts this influence. This is where qualitative research, such as Wang's (2023) in-depth interviews with Edinburgh residents, complement statistical evidence via critical interpretive depth. Wang's findings reveal that emotional attachment to historic places, the sense of continuity they provide, and their role in shaping place identity and belonging are key mechanisms through which heritage enhances wellbeing. By integrating these two approaches within one study, researchers can validate the existence of a phenomenon at scale while also uncovering the underlying lived experiences and perceptions that drive it, ensuring a richer, more holistic understanding of heritage's impact on wellbeing.

1. Integrated wellbeing assessments:

- The Places of Joy project (Gallou et al., 2022; Sofaer et al., 2021) adapted a validated scale for the restorative effects of natural environments to measure the wellbeing impact of heritage site visits.
- Hoare (2020) blended experimental techniques with biometric data, using emotional mapping and electrodermal activity (EDA) monitors to assess heritage site visitors' affective responses.

- GIS-based studies (Macdonald et al., 2023) have linked heritage accessibility with spatial inequalities in wellbeing outcomes, emphasizing the need for inclusive heritage policy interventions.

2.Longitudinal and participatory approaches:

- Studies which have implemented longitudinal tracking to assess the sustained impact of heritage engagement on wellbeing over time are limited. Consequently, the understanding of the long-term wellbeing impacts of heritage participation remain unclear (Heaslip et al., 2020).
- Community-led evaluations are becoming increasingly popular, particularly in heritage projects involving marginalised groups, , including older adults, asylum seekers, and individuals experiencing social isolation, ensuring that participants' voices shape the understanding of wellbeing outcomes (Blakely & Moles, 2019; Lobo, 2018).

4. Reviewing and synthesizing findings

Literature also includes systematic and narrative review approaches to consolidate existing knowledge on heritage and wellbeing. Systematic literature reviews (Burnell & Woodhouse, 2022; Pennington et al., 2019; Tierney et al., 2022 (Gallou, 2022; Tierney *et al.*, 2022; Pennington *et al.*, 2018)) have provided thorough assessments of how heritage contributes to wellbeing outcomes. Narrative reviews (Brown, 2019; Djabarouti, 2024) have critically examined methodological trends and emerging research gaps.

5. Spatial Analyses and case study research

Heritage research has increasingly incorporated spatial and environmental methodologies to understand the broader ecological and urban dynamics of heritage sites. GIS mapping and spatial analysis have been used to assess the geographical distribution of heritage sites and their accessibility. MacDonald et al. (2023; 2024) examined heritage exposure disparities across different places and between socio-economic groups, emphasizing the need for equitable access to heritage spaces. Case study research remains a popular methodological choice for exploring site-specific environmental challenges, such as the impacts of climate change on heritage sites (Ackland et al., 2024; Harkin et al., 2020; Venture et al., 2021).

6. Participatory Action Research: Heritage and health interventions

In applied research, participatory action research (PAR) has emerged as a valuable methodology for evaluating heritage's role in health and wellbeing interventions. The *Touching Heritage* programme (Vogelpoel et al., 2013) used a PAR approach to assess heritage-based wellbeing interventions in hospital and community care settings. Volunteers engaged in object-handling sessions with patients, promoting cognitive stimulation, emotional connection, and social interaction. This approach aligns with social prescribing initiatives, where heritage-based interventions are integrated into healthcare

frameworks to enhance wellbeing outcomes. Interviwee03 (Feb 2025), emphasises projects that are flexible and responsive to participants' needs, allowing them to evolve naturally. Creating "space for the project to breathe" (Interviewee03 Feb 2025) leads to more meaningful engagement and wellbeing impact for participants. She also suggests that co-creation with participants ensures that the projects align with their interests and needs. For instance, the Welcome Project, which works with staff at Salisbury District Hospital, focuses on connecting people to local heritage while celebrating their own cultural backgrounds.

In summary, the research methods employed in heritage and wellbeing studies between 2019 and 2024 reflect a rich methodological diversity, combining qualitative, quantitative, and mixed-method approaches. Quantitative wellbeing scales, including those from the health and social sciences, have been adapted for heritage research, offering comparability and statistical rigor. Meanwhile, qualitative approaches continue to provide vital insights into how individuals and communities frame and experience wellbeing through heritage engagement. The increasing adoption of mixed-methods research and participatory evaluation techniques offers a balanced, nuanced understanding of heritage’s role in public health and community wellbeing.

Table 1 provides an overview of key wellbeing indicators used in heritage research from 2019 to 2024, categorised into psychological, social, cultural, and physical domains, and referencing key studies which have used these approaches. The table highlights the diverse ways in which heritage engagement contributes to wellbeing at both individual and community levels. Indicators include:

- Psychological wellbeing: measures related to mental health, stress reduction, and self-esteem.
- Social wellbeing: Metrics assessing social connections, community cohesion, and shared identity.
- Cultural wellbeing: Indicators capturing a sense of belonging, cultural pride, and intergenerational knowledge transfer.
- Physical wellbeing: Measures related to physical activity and the use of heritage sites for recreational purposes.

Table 1 Key wellbeing indicators identified from the review of peer-reviewed academic research published between 2019 and 2025

Wellbeing Domain	Indicator	Description	Key References
Psychological Wellbeing	Life satisfaction	General self-reported measure of happiness and quality of life	Colwill (2024), Macdonald et al. (2023)
	Happiness and positive Affect	Assessment of emotional states and mood levels	Luck & Sayer (2024), Sofaer et al. (2021)
	Reduction in anxiety and stress	Decrease in perceived stress and anxiety	Dobson et al. (2021), Heaslip et al. (2020)
	Cognitive stimulation	Improvement in cognitive function and memory	Pennington et al. (2019), Burnell et al. (2024)
	Ontological security	Sense of stability, rootedness, and belonging in a changing world	Nolan (2019), Sofaer et al. (2021)
	Self-esteem and confidence	Increased self-worth through active participation	Pattinson et al. (2023), McHale et al. (2020)
Social Wellbeing	Social connection and interaction	Opportunities to form relationships through heritage	Innes et al. (2021), Beel & Wallace (2023)
	Community cohesion	Strengthened group identity and shared cultural understanding	Nayak (2019), Crooke & Maguire (2018)
	Social capital	Networks of trust, mutual support, and civic participation	Mak et al. (2021), Macdonald et al. (2023)
	Intergenerational bonding	Engagement between different generations through shared heritage	Beel & Wallace (2020), Twells et al. (2018)

	Reduction in Social Isolation	Heritage as a tool for inclusion, particularly for marginalized groups	Gallou (2022), Historic Environment Scotland (2019)
Cultural Wellbeing	Sense of Place and Belonging	Strong emotional ties to a location and its heritage	Lobo (2018), Ainsworth et al. (2019)
	Engagement in Heritage Learning	Increased knowledge and appreciation of history and culture	Burnell et al. (2024), Nolan (2020)
	Cultural Identity Validation	Reinforcement of ethnic, national, or community identity	Ashley (2020), Beel & Wallace (2023)
	Empowerment through Heritage Participation	Heritage as a means of social agency and activism	Nayak (2019), Simpson & Simmons (2019)
	Emotional Responses to Heritage	Heritage evoking nostalgia, inspiration, or reflection	Innes et al. (2021), Heaslip et al. (2020)
Physical Wellbeing	Physical Activity in Heritage Spaces	Walking, exploration, and movement in historic settings	Dobson et al. (2021), Sofaer et al. (2021)
	Health Benefits from Green Spaces	Nature-heritage sites contributing to stress reduction and wellness	Macdonald et al. (2023), Richardson et al. (2021)
	Engagement in Hands-on Activities	Archaeological fieldwork, conservation, and hands-on learning	Darvill et al. (2019), Pattinson et al. (2023)
	Therapeutic Benefits of Heritage Environments	Use of heritage settings for mental health interventions	Heaslip et al. (2020), Pennington et al. (2019)

3.2. Challenges and Innovations

Research is increasingly recognising the multi-dimensional impacts of heritage on wellbeing, encompassing psychological, social, cultural, and economic benefits. While heritage assets and activities have been shown to enhance social cohesion, reinforce identity, contribute to economic regeneration, and improve mental health outcomes, significant methodological, structural, and conceptual challenges persist, limiting the ability to robustly measure, sustain, and integrate these benefits into broader public policy.

3.2.1 Challenges and limitations in heritage wellbeing research

Despite increasing recognition of heritage's role in public health and wellbeing, numerous methodological, structural, and conceptual constraints challenge its effective evaluation and policy integration. These challenges include difficulties in establishing causal relationships, methodological inconsistencies, issues of accessibility and inclusion, sustainability concerns, and the complexities of 'difficult' heritage.

Methodological challenges: Evaluating wellbeing outcomes

Many wellbeing effects from heritage engagement are transient and deeply personal, making them difficult to capture using standardised tools. Both in the reviewed literature, and in the workshop and interviews with academics and practitioners, there was agreement that standardised scales often fail to reflect the unique and evolving nature of individual experiences with heritage. Interviewee04, for example (Feb 2025) critiques existing evaluation models, highlighting several key limitations. First, survey-based approaches can be problematic as they often introduce biases. For instance, participants may self-report "*perfect*" wellbeing scores, leading to unreliable data.

> "We had to scrap the surveys because participants were just writing '5' for everything." (interviewee 02, 2025)

Traditional wellbeing assessment tools, such as the Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale (WEMWBS), may be ill-suited to heritage research, and experts in the field emphasized the need for bespoke, sector-specific evaluation methods. Interview02 (Feb 2025) argues that conventional indicators fail to capture the unique impact of heritage experiences. Similarly, Interview03 (February 2025) critiques traditional frameworks, stating that many participants perceive them as clinical or medical in nature, making them inappropriate for heritage-led wellbeing projects. Interviewee03 advocates for participant-led evaluation models, where individuals define their own success and wellbeing indicators (Interviewee03, February 2025) Similarly, Interviewee05 (February 2025) critiques standard evaluation frameworks, noting that:

> "Typically, in the built environment process, social value gets a small percentage of consideration, and cultural value often slides under it or is ignored."

This perspective aligns with Interviewee08 (February 2025) broader critique of wellbeing metrics in heritage research, which she argues are not fit for purpose. These critiques reinforce the argument that conventional wellbeing measurement tools do not adequately reflect the richness of heritage experiences. Instead, scholars and practitioners call for holistic, reflective evaluation approaches that prioritize participant agency, contextual nuance, and qualitative depth. The use of external evaluators is also recommended to ensure objectivity and mitigate the biases inherent in self-reported wellbeing assessments.

Experts interviewed highlighted that the lack of consensus in definitions for "wellbeing" in heritage projects may undermine legitimacy of comparisons. For example, many projects use Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale (WEMWBS) while it only measures subjective wellbeing, not other dimensions like social or psychological wellbeing.

> “If you’re looking to evaluate wellbeing but not specific about what you are measuring, the evidence becomes circumstantial.” (Interviewee07, Feb 2025)

There is a tension here between the recognition of the inherently individualised and context-dependent nature of the wellbeing outcomes of heritage engagement, alongside acknowledgement of the limited strength of current evidence due either to the small sample sizes of more qualitatively-orientated research, or the varied measures and scales employed in quantitative and mixed-methods evaluation methodologies.

Rather than seeking a universal framework that applies across all heritage contexts, researchers and practitioners must remain attuned to the situated and evolving nature of heritage wellbeing. The future of evaluation in this field lies in approaches that increase comparability and robustness, while embracing flexibility, inclusivity, and methodological innovation, ensuring that heritage’s impact on wellbeing is understood in all its complexity.

Methodological challenges: Causality and the ‘heritage effect’

A significant methodological challenge in heritage wellbeing research is the difficulty of isolating causality. Many studies establish correlations between heritage engagement and increased life satisfaction but struggle to isolate the specific contribution of heritage from other environmental, social, or psychological factors. Colwill (2024) highlights that even with large-scale dataset analysis, concerns around endogeneity remain:

> “It will be difficult to tell whether people who live in areas of significant cultural heritage experience increased levels of life satisfaction, or whether happier people decide to live in areas of higher cultural heritage. Another potential source for endogeneity may arise because of unobservable factors, such as an individual’s personality or values, that may impact an individual’s life satisfaction. For example, people who are

> more interested in history may be more likely to live in areas with significant cultural heritage." (p.11)

Colwill also identifies the challenge of inequitable recognition of local heritage assets within the NHLE, whereby *'quality, significance, or economic/social value'* of local assets may not be reflected in their designation, whereas 'high value' assets may be near to, but not necessarily accessible to, a local community, and therefore not contribute to life satisfaction in expected ways (pp. 23-24).

In project or intervention-based work, there are challenges with meaningfully measuring wellbeing effects over a short timeframe. For example, within Alexandra Palace's Wild in the Park project (Heritage Alliance 2020: pp. 17), attendance and retention for young people with social, emotional and behavioural issues was difficult, posing a further challenge to evaluating the programme's wellbeing impacts. In intervention-based research, the short-term nature of many projects limits the ability to measure sustained wellbeing impacts. The *Human Henge* evaluation (Heaslip et al., 2020), which collected participant data one-year post-programme, remains an exception rather than the norm. Without longitudinal follow-ups, it is difficult to determine whether wellbeing benefits endure beyond immediate engagement.

As Gallou et al. (2022) highlight, it can be difficult to isolate the specific and unique effects of heritage sites' historic character from a broader association between cultural participation or nature-based/outdoor activity and wellbeing. This is a particular challenge in heritage sites which are also green spaces, as Flint and Jennings (2021) acknowledge in their work on visitor narratives of historic peatlands. This limitation is also highlighted in Colwill's (2024) analysis, where the study's data concerned with historic parks and gardens could not disentangle the contribution of the 'heritage' aspect of these spaces from their role as green spaces.

The specific contribution of a historical or archaeological dimension to the wellbeing benefits derived from a landscape have been qualitatively evidenced in work in neolithic sites, which captures the meaningfulness ascribed by participants to the monuments' long emplacement in the landscape, and associated feelings of ontological security and connection to a much larger human experience (for example, Nolan 2019). However, even in evaluation where the specific and unique value of heritage is less discernible, the amorphousness of heritage and green space-associated wellbeing, should not detract from the clear evidence that *both* green spaces and heritage sites are important community assets that improve quality of life, and that both amenities (and their often-overlapping status) should be prioritised in policies to promote public wellbeing. As per Last and Willis' evaluation of The Lincolnshire Wold's Landscape Network:

> 'Rather than separating out the natural and historic environment, a focus on wellbeing requires us to understand how they intersect and add value to one another' (2023: pp. 45).

Sampling bias and limited generalisability

Another major challenge in heritage wellbeing research is sampling bias, as studies typically engage participants who are already culturally active and engaged with heritage settings. For instance, research conducted by Sofaer et al. (2021) and Historic Environment Scotland (2019) demonstrates that heritage site visitor surveys often reflect a demographic that is older, predominantly female, and less ethnically diverse, reflecting visitor demographics. Twells et al. (2018) found that even targeted outreach efforts in South Yorkshire failed to adequately engage minority ethnic communities, with respondents overwhelmingly white-British. As outlined above, much research relies on qualitative or smaller-scale quantitative approaches (e.g. visitor surveys), and although these can sometimes generate a relatively large dataset – for example, the Places of Joy project which collected over 700 survey responses and over 300 short interviews across seven heritage sites (Gallou et al. 2022; Sofaer et al. 2021) – studies often worked with a much smaller sample of participants. While there is obvious value in smaller-scale, but more in-depth qualitative explorations, this approach differs significantly from the randomised control trial gold standard favoured in health research, meaning that the heritage sector may face challenges in robustly evidencing credibility and impact in the health sector, and to funding bodies who are key gatekeepers to wellbeing-focused work. Commissioners should be aware of this challenge facing heritage organisations and provide guidance on effective evaluation (Heritage Alliance 2020: pp. 77).

Additionally, studies such as Pomfret et al.'s (2023) and Sofaer et al.'s (2021) highlight heritage membership bias in heritage site-based visitor studies, meaning that research often captures experiences of frequent visitors and cultural enthusiasts, rather than those of underrepresented or disengaged groups. As such, while the reviewed research usefully clarifies wellbeing outcomes for existing or predominant user groups, it is less helpful in assessing how wellbeing outcomes may be extended to under-represented audiences, and further research is recommended in this area to assess barriers to participation and develop inclusive heritage and wellbeing strategies.

Complexity in evaluating wellbeing in 'difficult' heritage

Heritage engagement is often framed as positive, inspiring, and restorative, but this simplifies its complex emotional and social impacts. A focus on wellbeing outcomes can lead to a characterisation of heritage sites as 'nice' places which induce happiness, relaxation, or a sense of security. Of course, heritage is more complex than this, and participation in 'difficult' heritage, for example colonial histories, may interact with wellbeing very differently. Issues may also arise in work involving ethical contentions. For example, Sayer's (2022) account of disagreements over the treatment of human remains in a community archaeology project.

Hodson (2019) and Wincott et al. (2020) explored the tensions of heritage-led urban regeneration, demonstrating that while heritage projects can revitalise spaces, they can also contribute to gentrification, exclusion, and the erasure of working-class histories. While heritage can benefit community wellbeing through bolstering local economies via

heritage-led regeneration, promoting pride of place and fostering social cohesion, there is also potential for material and/or symbolic exclusion - to the potential wellbeing detriment of local communities. This is evidenced in Hodson's (2019) analysis of Belfast's regenerated Titanic Quarter, where interviews reveal local working-class community discontent around the 'selective reshaping' of ''their' history' as largely visitor or middle-class-orientated 'state-led heritage'. This is complexified further through a perceived erasure of the sectarian politics which underlays social memories of Northern Irish shipbuilding, and the Quarter's promotion as a politically neutral space in an urban context where 'working class community shared space' remains elusive (pp. 232-3). Similarly, Wincott et al.'s (2020) work on the role of Manchester's historic canal network in municipal 'place-marketing' argues that gentrification of these sites has entailed a 'misrecognition' of traditional local communities via a simplified recasting of (de)industrial history whereby problematic histories are either sanitised, or repackaged as 'dark heritage' – the latter adding further marketing value via 'edginess or grittiness' while diminishing the resourcefulness, agency and culture of working-class communities (pp. 744-747).

Sayer (2022) warns that an overemphasis on positive wellbeing outcomes, often driven by funding and policy pressures, can obscure the emotional challenges and ethical complexities associated with heritage engagement, ; reducing opportunities to consider community-engaged heritage as a risky process with a need for continual critical self-reflection and learning towards greater success and growth (see also Brownlee et al. 2024 on the importance of productive failure and reflexive practice in this work).

Interviewee03 critical reflections on community archaeology projects also highlights the risk for exclusion and marginalisation when projects 'highlight local and individual tensions, and pre-existing conflicting social dynamics' and act to reinforce existing local hierarchies (pp. 5-6; see also Twells et al. 2019 on the effacing of Black or South Asian heritage in South Yorkshire local history community groups), or when activities are not suitable for the knowledge and skills of their intended audience, leaving both facilitators and participants with a negative experience (Sayer 2022: pp. 6-7).

Sams et al. (2023), however, argue that difficult heritage can also generate eudaimonic wellbeing benefits, particularly through historical recognition, reconciliation, and connectedness, as evidenced in their study on Irish migrant histories in Bristol.

Structural and funding constraints in the heritage sector

A key barrier to the heritage sector's contribution to wellbeing outcomes is funding and capacity. Most of the projects/initiatives in the literature result from short-term grant funding; challenging the long-term sustainability of the work and limiting ability to build-upon partnerships and lessons learnt. The short-term nature of projects can itself pose a risk to the wellbeing of participants, particularly in the case of vulnerable groups or people experiencing significant life challenges. For example, as the ten-week Human Henge programme concluded, participants were distressed and anxious about the project's end:

‘they were particularly worried about losing the sense of belonging that had developed, the social acceptance that they had felt within the group sessions, and the friendships they had made’ (Heaslip et al. 2020: pp. 6). While the longer-term outcomes for participants were positive, there is wider learning here around a potential ‘crisis point’ for participants’ wellbeing as a project ends. Project legacy, enabling continued engagement post-project, should be considered in project design, if the ideal solution of a longer-term funding commitment is untenable. As the Interviewee04 (Feb 2025) warns:

> “Unless the community or someone else takes it on, it can actually lead to mental distress.”

Finally, work by MacDonald et al. (2023) underlines the potential wellbeing inequalities resulting from unequal geographic distribution of heritage sites whereby the most deprived areas have fewer heritage sites than the least deprived, as well as the well-evidenced barriers faced by some social groups in accessing heritage. Addressing this inequality is particularly important, as Mak et al.’s (2021) analysis suggests that the wellbeing benefits derived from engagement in community cultural assets (including heritage sites) may be stronger in more deprived areas.

3.2.2. Innovations in Heritage Wellbeing Research

To address some of these challenges, researchers have introduced methodological advancements and conceptual innovations in heritage wellbeing research. New research integrates quantitative and qualitative approaches, allowing for more comprehensive and context-sensitive evaluations. The Community Voice Method (CVM) (Ainsworth et al., 2019) captures diverse stakeholder perspectives through filmed interviews, offering deeper insights into community experiences. Geospatial mapping technologies (Dobson et al., 2021) use real-time tracking and emotional mapping to analyse how individuals engage with heritage sites.

A growing trend in heritage research is co-creation, where heritage professionals and communities collaborate to design wellbeing interventions that reflect local needs. For instance, the AMPHORA framework (Burnell et al., 2024) promotes partnerships between heritage professionals and mental health practitioners, ensuring that heritage-based interventions align with therapeutic best practices. Social prescribing, where healthcare providers recommend heritage-based activities as part of broader mental health strategies, is emerging as an effective intervention (Birch et al., 2020).

3.3. Research Gaps in Heritage and Wellbeing Research

Despite the growing body of literature exploring the interconnections between heritage and wellbeing, numerous research gaps persist, presenting opportunities for further scholarly inquiry. These gaps span methodological inconsistencies, inclusion and accessibility, sustainability, the impact of climate change, and the evolving role of digital heritage. Addressing these issues through interdisciplinary collaboration, refined

evaluation frameworks, and policy integration will significantly enhance the understanding and application of heritage as a wellbeing resource.

3.3.1. Understanding gaps

Wellbeing evaluation

A limitation in current research is the lack of relevant wellbeing impact assessment tools, which hampers the comparability of studies and limits the generalizability of findings. While the Five Ways to Wellbeing model (Tierney et al., 2022) has been applied in certain heritage studies, it has not yet been systematically integrated into heritage research methodologies. Similarly, Gallou et al. (2022) emphasize the need for sector-specific wellbeing indicators, noting that heritage remains underrepresented in national wellbeing frameworks. Interviewee06 and 07 (2025) argue for the co-design of wellbeing evaluation tools that accurately capture heritage's unique impacts. Integrating Social Return on Investment (SROI) methodologies has been proposed as a means to quantify the social benefits of heritage-related wellbeing interventions (Expert Interview 2025). However, such models require further refinement to ensure they accurately reflect the complex interplay between heritage, social value, and individual wellbeing.

Moreover, the absence of validated quantitative evaluation methodologies specifically designed for use in heritage settings hinders the collection of comparable data across different heritage contexts (Wolferstan, 2023).

Addressing inclusion and access

Research has focused on formal heritage sites, meaning that less is known about the wellbeing outcomes associated with community-driven, intangible, and marginalised heritage. Twells et al. (2019), for example, critique the exclusion of minority heritage narratives, emphasising the need for more culturally inclusive research approaches.

Further studies should explore how different demographic groups experience heritage wellbeing benefits and ensure that marginalised voices - including older adults, asylum seekers, and individuals experiencing social isolation- are included in research and policy discussions. This aligns with Nayak (2019) and Ashley (2020), who argue that heritage can serve as a powerful vehicle for social activism and identity reclamation, yet empirical research on these topics remains underdeveloped. Issues of diversity and inclusion, particularly the representation of minority groups in heritage initiatives, require greater attention (Pennington et al., 2019). Moreover, current research frameworks often neglect socio-spatial inequalities and the lived experiences of diverse communities (Atkinson et al., 2020). As Macdonald et al. (2024) observe: "*From our study, despite quantifying contact with heritage, we know little of engagement with it*." (p.5).

The role of heritage in public health policy also remains underexplored, despite strong evidence suggesting its wellbeing benefits (Historic Environment Scotland, 2019). Experts suggest that policymakers should integrate heritage indicators into national

wellbeing measurement strategies, ensuring that heritage is recognised as a public health asset.

Climate change, and conservation strategies

Heritage sites are increasingly threatened by climate change, yet the research on balancing conservation priorities with public engagement remains insufficient. Venture et al. (2021) argue that climate change not only threatens heritage but also reshapes cultural memory, necessitating adaptive management strategies. Sesana et al. (2021) highlight the importance of acknowledging diverse climate change scenarios when considering heritage conservation, as sites are constantly evolving alongside environmental changes. Venture et al. (2021) further assert: "*Climate change can lead to the emergence of new collective meanings and memories, as well as the erosion or erasure of old ones*" (p.396), yet avoiding all aspects of heritage loss is neither achievable nor necessarily desirable (p.398). The intersection between climate change, cultural heritage, and emotional responses also warrants further exploration. Venture et al. (2021) suggest that during times of crisis, uncertainty regarding heritage preservation can generate feelings of anxiety, a concept that aligns with research on eco-anxiety.

The role of digital heritage

While digital heritage offers new opportunities for accessibility and engagement, its psychological and social impacts remain insufficiently understood. Beel and Wallace (2020) highlight the ongoing tension between digital and traditional heritage practices, which requires further study to ensure that innovation does not compromise cultural preservation. Luck & Sayer (2024) stress the importance of ensuring that digital heritage remains a supplement, rather than a substitute, for in-person experiences. Additionally, the role of heritage in shaping social capital is underexplored, particularly regarding how historic assets contribute to trust and belonging (Gallou, 2022). Digital heritage has the potential to foster social capital by creating new spaces for collective memory, shared cultural narratives, and community engagement beyond physical boundaries. Studies should also investigate how aesthetic appreciation of historic environments influences cognitive and emotional wellbeing, especially within urban settings. More research is needed to explore how different demographic groups engage with digital heritage and whether it provides comparable wellbeing benefits to physical interactions with heritage sites.

Sustainability and long-term wellbeing initiatives

One of the persistent challenges in heritage wellbeing research is the sustainability of interventions. Many heritage projects are short-term initiatives, and their long-term impacts on wellbeing and community development remain unclear. Interviewee04 (Feb 2025) warns that heritage projects that lack long-term integration risk harming participants' wellbeing by creating unrealistic expectations or fostering dependence on temporary programs. Furthermore, the management, support, and training of volunteers remains an area requiring further study. While heritage volunteering is widely recognized for its wellbeing benefits, Davenport et al. (2021) caution that: "Further research work is

needed to explore management practices around the issue of helping older people to transition out of volunteering in a way that minimises any potential negative impacts." (p.348).

Research should also investigate alternative engagement models, such as heritage craft skills and employment pathways, as sustainable interventions. Interviewee01 (Feb 2025) highlights the decline of traditional trades such as stonemasonry, blacksmithing, and woodworking, suggesting that structured pathways for youth engagement in heritage careers could serve as effective long-term wellbeing strategies.

3.3.2. Moving the Wellbeing and Heritage research forward

To systematically explore these gaps, this section utilises the Wellbeing and Historic Environment Framework, which categorises heritage's impact into the six interrelated themes. Each theme presents distinct areas requiring further research, but also shares cross-cutting challenges, particularly in terms of equitable access, long-term impact assessment, and integration into broader wellbeing policies.

Identified research gaps under each theme

1. Heritage as Process:

Encouraging participation in volunteer projects, such as community archaeology, to create long-term engagement and wellbeing benefits.

Key gaps:

- Long-Term Wellbeing impact:
  A lack of longitudinal studies tracking participants' wellbeing before, during, and after engagement in heritage volunteer projects (Atkinson et al., 2020).
- Barriers to participation:
  Limited research on why certain groups (e.g., low-income individuals, ethnic minorities, and individuals with disabilities) are underrepresented in heritage volunteering (Twells et al., 2019).
- Diversity and inclusion in Volunteering:
  More research is needed to increase accessibility in heritage volunteering, ensuring it benefits diverse and underrepresented communities (Pennington et al., 2019).
- Skills development and Wellbeing:
  The link between heritage skill acquisition (e.g., stonemasonry, excavation) and long-term wellbeing, employment opportunities, and self-confidence remains underexplored (Interviewee01, 2025).
- Volunteer management and Wellbeing risks:

Further research is required on how to help older volunteers transition out of heritage volunteering while minimising negative mental health impacts (Davenport et al., 2021).

2. Heritage as Participation:

Promoting heritage sites visits as a means of increasing life satisfaction and social interaction.

Key gaps:

- Causal link between Heritage visits and Wellbeing:
  While existing studies show a correlation, there is limited causal evidence demonstrating how heritage visits directly improve mental and emotional wellbeing (Gallou et al., 2022).
- Measuring social benefits of Heritage visits:
  More research is needed to explore whether group visits provide greater wellbeing benefits than solo visits (Macdonald et al., 2024.
- Accessibility of Heritage sites:
- There is insufficient data on the impact of financial, physical, and social barriers to heritage site access, particularly for marginalised groups (Twells et al., 2019).
- Comparison between different types of Heritage engagement:
  Limited studies compare the wellbeing impact of urban vs. rural heritage sites, built heritage vs. natural heritage, and tangible vs. intangible heritage (Historic Environment Scotland, 2019).
- Digital engagement vs. physical visits:
- The rise of virtual heritage experiences requires further investigation into whether they provide comparable wellbeing benefits to physical site visits (Luck & Sayer, 2024).

3. Heritage as Mechanism:

Cultural heritage as a tool for bringing people together, such as through community memory-sharing and cultural events.

Key gaps:

- Role of cultural memory in Wellbeing: There is insufficient evidence on how oral histories, commemorative events, and memory-sharing initiatives impact wellbeing and social cohesion (Beel & Wallace, 2020).
- Impact on marginalised groups: Research is limited on how heritage-based social programs benefit underrepresented populations, such as refugees, older adults, and disabled individuals and those experiencing social isolation (Ashley, 2020).
- Effectiveness of different heritage-based social interventions: There is little comparative research between structured programs (e.g., guided heritage walks) and informal engagement (e.g., self-guided exploration) in fostering wellbeing (Nayak, 2019).
- Heritage and conflict resolution: More research is needed on how heritage can facilitate post-conflict community rebuilding and reconciliation, particularly in divided societies (Sesana et al., 2021).
- Role of festivals and cultural events in Wellbeing: Limited studies assess how participation in heritage-linked festivals and reenactments influences mental health and cultural identity (Macdonald et al., 2024).

4. Heritage as Healing:

Incorporates heritage-related activities (e.g., museum object handling for hospital patients) to support mental health, self-expression, and resilience.

Key gaps:

- Clinical evidence for heritage-based therapies: A lack of medical studies validating the therapeutic benefits of heritage-based activities in clinical settings (Historic Environment Scotland, 2019).
- Comparative effectiveness of heritage-based interventions: Limited research comparing heritage therapy with other non-medical interventions (e.g., music therapy, nature-based therapy) (Interviewee06 & 07, 2025).
- Impact on PTSD and trauma recovery: Insufficient research on how heritage engagement benefits trauma survivors, particularly displaced communities and veterans (Venture et al., 2021).
- Heritage in social prescribing: More evidence is needed to integrate heritage into formal healthcare and social prescribing models (Gallou, 2022).

- Tailored heritage therapy: Research should explore whether different demographic groups benefit more from specific heritage activities, such as object handling vs. site visits (Sayer, 2015).

5. Heritage as Place:

To strengthen connections between people and place, fostering a sense of belonging and community cohesion.

Key gaps:

- Measuring ‘Sense of Place’ and Wellbeing:
  Limited tools exist to quantify the psychological benefits of historic places (Wolferstan, 2023).
- Heritage, identity, and diverse communities:
  More studies are needed to understand how marginalised groups - , including older adults, asylum seekers, and individuals experiencing social isolation - experience heritage and its role in identity reclamation (Twells et al., 2019).
- Temporal changes in sense of place:
  Research should investigate how modernisation, restoration, or destruction of historic sites affects mental wellbeing (Venture et al., 2021).

6. Heritage as Environment:

Recognizing the benefits of historic landscapes and green spaces for mental and physical wellbeing.

Key gaps:

- Climate change and Heritage wellbeing: More studies are needed on how climate-induced changes to heritage sites affect psychological wellbeing (Sesana et al., 2021).
- Long-term impact of Heritage green spaces: Insufficient research on whether repeated exposure to historic landscapes provides cumulative mental health benefits (Macdonald et al., 2024).
- Role of historic landscapes in active wellbeing: There is limited data on the psychological benefits of physical exercise in historic landscapes (Gallou, 2022).

Future research will need to embrace interdisciplinary collaboration, combining heritage, psychology, public health, and social sciences to create a more holistic understanding of heritage as a driver of wellbeing.

3.3. Workshop Outputs – Practitioner Perspectives

A 1.5-hour workshop designed to explore themes emerging from the research was held in February 2025. Primarily targeted at heritage practitioners, this interaction focussed on barriers limiting wellbeing value creation and perspectives on future policy development.

3.3.1. Challenge and barriers to wellbeing value creation

Extensive insights were offered, drawing on professional and operational experience of delivering heritage and wellbeing projects. During the practitioner workshop, participants identified several key factors necessary for facilitating wellbeing value creation within heritage initiatives, alongside significant challenges that need to be addressed. The discussion highlighted the importance of sustainable funding, workforce development, and organizational policies that prioritize wellbeing outcomes. Workforce training was emphasized as essential for equipping practitioners with the skills to integrate wellbeing-focused interventions effectively. Additionally, robust evaluation frameworks are needed to measure impact and demonstrate the value of heritage-led wellbeing projects.

However, several barriers hinder the success of these initiatives. Limited time and resources, particularly regarding staff capacity and volunteer management, were noted as constraints. Building strong community relationships and fostering trust was seen as critical but often difficult due to site-specific challenges, policy misalignment, and leadership engagement issues. Participants also highlighted the need for cross-sector collaboration with health, education, and social services to enhance heritage's role in wellbeing. Ensuring inclusive engagement, safeguarding practices, and a shared understanding of wellbeing across stakeholders was seen as vital for long-term success. Addressing these challenges would enable heritage projects to maximize their impact in supporting social inclusion and mental wellbeing.

3.3.2. Future Policy Development

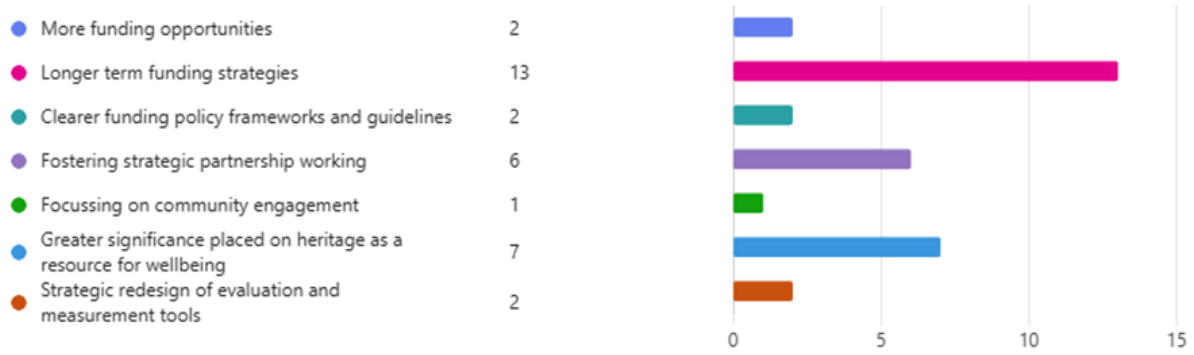
Practitioners were asked to identify one area of policy focus for the future.

1. The need for longer-term funding strategies (39%)

A significant proportion of practitioners (39%) identified longer-term funding as the most critical factor in ensuring the sustainability of heritage-led wellbeing projects. The dominant sentiment among respondents was that short-term funding cycles limit the ability to build meaningful, long-lasting relationships with communities and develop projects with sustained impact. Practitioners noted that the current funding landscape forces them to continuously apply for new grants, often abandoning successful initiatives before their full potential can be realized. This short-termism not only disrupts progress but also discourages ambitious or experimental approaches that could enhance engagement and wellbeing outcomes.

Furthermore, respondents highlighted the difficulty of accessing health-related funding, despite growing recognition of the cost-effectiveness of heritage-based wellbeing interventions within social prescribing models. The lack of financial security leads to high-risk planning environments, limiting the ability to refine and improve projects over time. Practitioners emphasized that without sustained funding, heritage cannot be fully leveraged as a wellbeing resource, as each funding cycle forces organizations to "reinvent" rather than enhance and refine existing initiatives. This perspective underscores the pressing need for multi-year investment models and policy support for long-term funding structures that provide financial stability and enable heritage organizations to plan strategically for sustained community impact.

Figure 2 Workshop Participants' responses on priority for future policy focus.



2. Recognising heritage as a resource for wellbeing (21%)

Beyond funding concerns, 21% of practitioners stressed the need for greater recognition of heritage as a legitimate and valuable resource for wellbeing. Many respondents argued that heritage is often overlooked in wider health and social policy discussions, limiting its potential to attract investment and support. They emphasized that integrating heritage into wellbeing-focused strategies at local and national levels could drive more targeted funding opportunities, as policymakers and funders would better understand its value.

Additionally, some practitioners highlighted the disconnect between heritage preservation and wellbeing priorities, noting that heritage must be framed as a catalyst for social impact rather than merely as an asset for historical conservation. A stronger strategic alignment between heritage and wellbeing frameworks could enhance public engagement, encourage broader institutional support, and facilitate more cohesive funding streams that integrate cultural, health, and social sectors. The findings suggest that raising awareness at the policy level and embedding heritage into cross-sectoral wellbeing initiatives could strengthen the sector’s ability to secure resources and drive community engagement.

3. Strategic partnership working (18%)

Another 18% of practitioners emphasized the importance of strategic partnerships as a key factor in improving the sustainability and impact of heritage-led wellbeing initiatives. Respondents highlighted that collaborative approaches help to break down silos, reduce

duplication of efforts, and leverage existing expertise and resources more effectively. Many saw partnerships as a way to enhance policy alignment across sectors such as health, education, and local government, ensuring that heritage-based wellbeing projects are better integrated into broader public service frameworks.

Practitioners with policy experience noted that the absence of coordinated strategic partnerships has limited the social value impact of heritage, despite increased government interest in addressing health inequalities and recognizing the role of culture in wellbeing. By strengthening partnerships between heritage, health, and social sectors, organizations could demonstrate impact more effectively to government bodies and funding agencies, increasing the likelihood of sustained investment. However, many also emphasized that partnerships alone are not a panacea—they require long-term funding to be effective, reinforcing the interconnectedness of financial security and collaborative efforts.

The findings from practitioners reinforce the interconnected challenges and opportunities in sustaining heritage-led wellbeing initiatives. While longer-term funding was the most frequently cited necessity, practitioners also emphasized the need for greater recognition of heritage as a wellbeing resource and stronger cross-sectoral partnerships. These three areas are interdependent: without long-term funding, strategic partnerships struggle to be effective, and without recognition of heritage's role in wellbeing, securing funding remains a challenge. Addressing these systemic issues through policy reform, multi-year funding commitments, and integrated wellbeing frameworks would significantly enhance the long-term impact and sustainability of heritage-based social value initiatives.

4. Conclusion and Recommendations

4.1. Conclusion

This research has provided a comprehensive review of heritage-led wellbeing initiatives, triangulating evidence from the literature, expert interviews, a sector-wide online survey and workshop. Our findings highlight the significant yet often under-recognised role of heritage in promoting wellbeing, with distinct benefits that differentiate it from other cultural interventions. Unlike general creative arts participation, heritage engagement fosters deep connections to place, history, and community, offering a sense of continuity and belonging that enhances mental and social wellbeing. Despite clear benefits, heritage is not fully integrated into existing wellbeing frameworks, and its impact is often evaluated using metrics that fail to capture its true value.

A critical limitation of current research and practice is the lack of a standardised, interdisciplinary approach to evaluating heritage-led wellbeing impact assessment. The sector continues to grapple with methodological challenges, including the tension between qualitative, participant-led evaluation and clinical-style metrics preferred by public health and governmental bodies. This misalignment not only affects funding accessibility but also risks misrepresenting the transformative potential of heritage interventions. Our findings also underscore the urgent need for long-term, participatory studies that go beyond short-term project cycles to assess sustained wellbeing impacts. Without such longitudinal research, the sector remains at risk of designing interventions that lack depth or continuity, ultimately limiting their effectiveness to contribute to societal needs.

Cross-sector collaboration emerges as a central theme in ensuring the success of heritage-led wellbeing initiatives. Experts agree that repositioning heritage as a vital contributor to health and social policy requires integrated efforts between heritage professionals, health practitioners, psychologists, social scientists, and policymakers. As Interviewee02 (Feb 2025) asserts, attempting to fit heritage into pre-existing wellbeing models is a flawed approach; instead, the sector must advocate for frameworks that genuinely reflect the distinctive nature of heritage engagement. Similarly, as Interviewee01 (2025) emphasizes, “*We’re all stronger if we work together*”, a sentiment that reinforces the necessity of sector-wide cooperation in shaping policy and practice.

To fully harness the potential of heritage for improving wellbeing, strategic policy shifts are required. These must not only ensure the recognition of heritage as an essential component of public health and community development but also establish dedicated funding and evaluation frameworks that align with the sector’s specific needs. The following recommendations outline practical pathways for achieving these goals.

4.2. Policy and Research recommendations

To strengthen heritage as a key contributor to public health and social cohesion, institutions such as Historic England, the Heritage Alliance, and public health agencies should lead cross-sector dialogues on integrating heritage into national wellbeing frameworks. The following five key recommendations provide a structured pathway to achieving this goal:

1. Enhance the sustainability and impact of Heritage-led Wellbeing initiatives

Key recommendation: Help reform funding and evaluation models to ensure long-term impact.

Heritage-led wellbeing initiatives often struggle to achieve long-term sustainability due to short-term funding cycles. To maximise impact, it is crucial to develop long-term funding structures and participant-led evaluation models that capture the full spectrum of heritage's impact on wellbeing.

Research areas:

- Develop sector-specific wellbeing evaluation frameworks that integrate qualitative and quantitative measures to assess both immediate and long-term impacts.
- Encourage public health agencies (e.g., NHS, mental health charities, local councils) to recognize heritage-based interventions as legitimate health and wellbeing initiatives, securing them a place in funding schemes.
- Introduce heritage-based social prescribing models, ensuring that community-led engagement projects in archaeology, conservation, and historic site interpretation receive sustained investment and structured evaluation.
- Ensure that heritage wellbeing programs align with broader social and environmental sustainability goals, particularly through place-based strategies that revitalize communities and support social resilience.

Link to themes: Heritage as Process, Participation, Healing, and Place

2. Enhance cross-sector collaboration for more effective Wellbeing initiatives

Key recommendation: Build interdisciplinary partnerships between heritage institutions, public health bodies, and local communities.

Effective heritage-led wellbeing interventions require collaboration across multiple sectors, including heritage professionals, psychologists, social scientists, healthcare

practitioners, and urban planners. These collaborations can help develop best practice models that integrate expertise from different fields, ensuring a holistic and evidence-based approach to wellbeing.

Research areas:

- Support interdisciplinary research initiatives that explore the therapeutic potential of community archaeology, museum interventions, and conservation work.
- Encourage co-created projects between local heritage groups and community health organizations to design interventions tailored to specific social needs.
- Develop training programs for heritage professionals to better understand public health priorities and collaborate effectively with health and wellbeing practitioners.

Link to themes: Heritage as Mechanism, Healing, and Place

3. Develop sector-specific wellbeing indicators to strengthen evaluation and policy recognition

Key Recommendation: Move beyond generic wellbeing metrics by creating tailored heritage indicators.

Current wellbeing research often applies broad indicators that fail to capture heritage-specific outcomes. Developing sector-specific metrics is essential to accurately assess how heritage engagement fosters wellbeing and to position heritage as a critical component of public health strategies.

Research areas:

- Establish heritage-specific wellbeing indicators, incorporating measures such as cultural identity formation, place attachment, and social capital development.
- Develop impact assessment toolkits for heritage professionals, enabling them to assess wellbeing outcomes with greater consistency and methodological rigor.
- Build a database of relevant qualitative approaches (e.g., narrative-based assessments, participatory research, and lived experience documentation) to complement existing quantitative wellbeing models.

- Integrate Social Return on Investment (SROI) methodologies to quantify the social and economic benefits of heritage-led wellbeing initiatives.

Link to themes: Heritage as Participation, Process, and Environment

4. Prioritise longitudinal and participatory research to strengthen evidence for policy and practice

Key Recommendation: Expand research on the long-term effects of heritage engagement on wellbeing.

Most heritage-led wellbeing initiatives lack follow-up evaluations, making it difficult to assess their long-term impact on mental health, social integration, and identity formation. Research should prioritize longitudinal studies that track heritage participants over time, ensuring that interventions are designed for sustainable, lasting change.

Research areas:

- Contribute to longitudinal studies to assess the sustained benefits of heritage-led initiatives over multiple years.
- Develop follow-up impact assessment models at key intervals to track emerging wellbeing outcomes.
- Integrate community-led heritage documentation into national planning frameworks, ensuring that citizen-driven heritage narratives inform policy.
- Explore the impact of heritage on vulnerable groups, including marginalised communities, people with disabilities, and socially isolated populations, by embedding inclusion-focused wellbeing research into heritage programs.

Link to themes: Heritage as Process, Healing, and Place

5. Embed Heritage-based interventions into established health pathways and social prescribing models

Key recommendation: Integrate heritage into national wellbeing strategies and public health pathways.

Heritage must move beyond ad hoc projects and be formally recognized as an integral component of mental health and wellbeing policy. By embedding heritage within social prescribing models, public health initiatives, and urban planning strategies, the sector can solidify its role as a core contributor to community health.

Research areas:

- Establish formal partnerships between heritage organisations and primary healthcare providers to integrate heritage-based social prescribing into community health programs.
- Develop evidence-based policy guidelines for incorporating heritage wellbeing initiatives into local and national public health strategies.
- Promote adaptive reuse of historic buildings as community wellbeing hubs, providing spaces for social interaction, therapeutic activities, and mental health support.
- Strengthen policy dialogue between heritage and government bodies to ensure that heritage wellbeing indicators are incorporated into national wellbeing frameworks.

Link to Themes: Heritage as Healing, Mechanism, and Place

The evidence reveals that heritage is more than a cultural asset; it is an active, dynamic contributor to health, social cohesion, and sustainability. However, to fully realise its potential, the sector must move beyond ad hoc projects and fragmented evaluation methods toward a cohesive, evidence-based approach that is both rigorous and adaptable. As Interviewee07 and others (Interviews, Feb 2025) noted, without sound wellbeing models, benefits from heritage interventions may be left unidentified and hence, unchecked. It is, therefore, imperative that policymakers, funders, and practitioners work collaboratively to ensure that heritage-led wellbeing initiatives are designed, implemented, and evaluated in ways that genuinely benefit communities.

The next step is clear: the heritage sector must position itself not as an adjunct to existing wellbeing models, but as a leader in developing innovative, holistic approaches to mental and social wellbeing. By encouraging collaboration across sectors, reforming evaluation methods, and integrating heritage into wider policy agendas, communities and future generations can better benefit from the potential of heritage interventions.

5. Annexes

Annexe 1: Key to identifying evidence within the outputs

Research Objectives as defined in call	**Output 1: Comprehensive report**	**Output 2: Raw Data in Excel file**	**Output 3: Infographic**
A. Map and categorize completed and ongoing research produced in the last five years, focusing on public sector and academic outputs in the UK and Ireland.	Comprehensive report	Ongoing in excel Completed with key project referenced in excel	n/a
B. Analyse key research trends and identify gaps to guide future work and funding priorities for improving the quality and deliverability of wellbeing outcomes through heritage	Comprehensive report	n/a	Yes
C. Ensure **wellbeing outcomes** from the historic environment and archaeology are captured and understanding how **evaluation** is currently being approached.	Comprehensive report	Yes	Yes
D. Understand which organisations are funding such work as is covered by A.	No	Excel database	n/a
E. Understand which organisations are focusing current and future research in this expanding area and likely to become potential key partners for HE.	No	Excel database	n/a

Table 2 shows where the research objectives are covered and contained within the corresponding research outputs (comprehensive report, excel database and infographic); n/a = not applicable.

Annexe 2: Case studies

Case Study: Traditional Craft Skills and Community-Led Wellbeing at Craig Gwladus Country Park, Wales

Project Title: Putting the Making in Place-Making: The Role of Traditional Craft Skills and Community-Led Conservation in Re-Framing Historic Environment Services

Overview

- Project Name: Putting the Making in Place-Making: The Role of Traditional Craft Skills and Community-Led Conservation in Re-Framing Historic Environment Services
- Location: Craig Gwladus Country Park, Vale of Neath, South Wales
- Lead Organisation(s): Swansea University's Centre for Heritage Research and Training
- Partner Organisations:
    - Craig Gwladus Country Park Volunteer Group
    - Further Education colleges in Wales
    - Local community organisations and heritage groups
    - Neath Port Talbot Council
- Project Duration: Ongoing since 2012, with expanded community engagement and training initiatives from 2023 onwards
- Funding Source(s):
    - Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) Creative Communities Program
    - Local government support (Neath Port Talbot Council)
    - Volunteer contributions and community fundraising
- Target Audience:
    - Local residents (fostering a sense of place and belonging)
    - Students from disadvantaged backgrounds (skills training and work experience)

- Older adults (intergenerational learning and community resilience)
- Volunteers and heritage enthusiasts (hands-on conservation experience)
- Heritage and environmental professionals (exploring sustainable conservation models)

Primary Heritage Theme(s)

- Participation: The project is deeply rooted in active engagement, with local community members taking part in heritage conservation through hands-on craft skills.
- Process: The initiative focuses on co-production and sustainability in heritage conservation, emphasizing community participation over expert-driven approaches.
- Environment: The project promotes adaptive reuse and conservation of industrial heritage within a natural park setting, incorporating ecological sustainability into heritage management.

Keywords

- Heritage-led regeneration
- Traditional craft skills
- Community engagement
- Wellbeing through conservation
- Adaptive Heritage Reuse (AHR)
- Place-making
- Social inclusion
- Industrial heritage

Related Fields

- Cultural Capital: Enhancing public understanding of local industrial history and its relevance to contemporary issues.
- Behavioural Change: Encouraging participation in traditional crafts as a means of fostering resilience and wellbeing.
- Environmental Sustainability: Supporting sustainable conservation practices through participatory craft-based interventions.

- Social Inclusion: Creating opportunities for intergenerational learning and community collaboration.

Relevance to Priority Areas

- Mental Health: Provides a structured, meaningful activity that improves emotional and psychological wellbeing.
- Loneliness & Social Inclusion: Encourages collaborative participation in heritage conservation, fostering social bonds.
- Older Adults & Young People: Engages both elderly community members and students from disadvantaged backgrounds, supporting intergenerational knowledge transfer.

Project Description

Craig Gwladus Country Park in the Vale of Neath, Wales, has undergone a significant transformation through a community-driven conservation project focused on traditional craft skills and hands-on heritage management. The project arose in response to budget cuts in the heritage sector, which threatened the viability of maintaining heritage assets. The initiative sought to reposition heritage conservation as a community-led activity, embedding participatory approaches that promote social and environmental resilience.

This project was carried out in collaboration with Swansea University's Centre for Heritage Research and Training, working with local volunteers, students from Further Education colleges, and community groups to restore and maintain historical industrial structures in the park. The core activities included:

- Archaeological excavation and conservation of historic industrial structures, such as an old colliery smithy.
- Training in heritage craft skills, including traditional stone masonry, lime mortar techniques, and charcoal production.
- Community-led environmental management, such as maintaining paths, clearing vegetation, and restoring structures using sustainable materials.
- Educational and wellbeing-focused workshops, bringing together local residents to explore the social, cultural, and environmental value of heritage.

Methodologies

- Participatory Conservation Approach: Community members worked alongside experts to carry out conservation work, fostering ownership and engagement.
- Heritage Craft Training: Participants learned skills such as masonry, carpentry, and traditional lime mortar use, contributing to heritage maintenance.
- Outdoor, Intergenerational Learning: The project integrated older community members with younger apprentices, creating a skills-sharing environment.
- Adaptive Heritage Reuse (AHR): Encouraging self-organized and self-managed conservation efforts for long-term sustainability.

Evaluations

- Increased Participation: The project saw a steady rise in volunteer hours, quadrupling initial engagement projections.
- Self-Reported Wellbeing Improvements: Participants noted increased confidence, improved social connections, and a sense of purpose.
- Environmental Impact: Sustainable conservation methods were used, reducing reliance on resource-heavy interventions.
- Economic Value: The initiative demonstrated the potential for heritage-led regeneration in post-industrial communities, attracting interest from policymakers.

Challenges

- Funding Cuts: Reductions in state funding for heritage conservation required reliance on volunteer labour and external partnerships.
- Lack of Designated Heritage Protection: The informal nature of the site made it easier to implement activities but raised concerns about long-term safeguarding.
- Scalability & Sustainability: The need for ongoing community involvement and financial support to maintain momentum beyond the initial intervention.

Future Research & Recommendations

- Developing a Framework for Community-Led Heritage Stewardship: Establishing formalized partnerships between local government, universities, and community groups to provide long-term heritage management solutions.
- Expanding Adaptive Heritage Reuse Strategies: Investigating how community-driven conservation models can be replicated in other post-industrial landscapes.

- Measuring Long-Term Wellbeing Impacts: Conducting longitudinal studies to assess the lasting mental health and social benefits of heritage-based craft and conservation initiatives.

Conclusion

Craig Gwladus Country Park demonstrates the transformative potential of heritage conservation when embedded within community-led participation models. By combining traditional craft skills, hands-on conservation, and intergenerational collaboration, this initiative has fostered stronger community ties, improved mental wellbeing, and enhanced environmental sustainability.

This case study highlights a scalable model for integrating heritage into social prescribing frameworks and serves as a best-practice example of using participatory conservation to deliver cultural, social, and economic benefits.

Case Study: Scotland's Places, People, and Their Stories – A Wellbeing-Focused Heritage Strategy by the Scottish Civic Trust

Overview

- Project Name: Scotland's Places, People, and Their Stories
- Location: Scotland (nationwide initiative)
- Lead Organisation(s): Scottish Civic Trust
- Partner Organisations: Grassroots community and civic groups, local heritage organisations, education and skills development institutions
- Project Duration: 2025–2030 (Five-Year Strategy)
- Funding Source(s): Scottish Civic Trust, public sector support, grants, and partnerships
- Target Audience: Local communities, civic and heritage groups, young people, refugees and migrants, individuals from marginalised communities

Primary Heritage Theme

- Belonging: Enhancing integration and community identity through storytelling, public engagement, and heritage-led placemaking.
- Participation: Encouraging civic involvement through community networks, heritage skills training, and inclusive heritage events.
- Healing: Using heritage and placemaking initiatives to improve wellbeing and foster safer, more inclusive environments.
- Process: Facilitating learning, skills development, and public consultation to shape policies that benefit local communities.

Keywords

- Heritage and Wellbeing
- Community-Led Placemaking
- Civic Engagement
- Diverse Heritage
- Traditional Building Skills

- Public History & Storytelling
- Sustainability & Climate Action

Related Fields

- Cultural Capital: Strengthening Scotland's national and local identity through engagement with heritage and placemaking.
- Behavioural Change: Encouraging communities to take active roles in heritage preservation and skills training.
- Social Inclusion: Supporting diverse communities, including migrants and refugees, to feel integrated through participation in Scotland's heritage.
- Pride of Place: Empowering local groups to advocate for and protect their built and cultural environment.
- Education and Skills Development: Offering construction sector taster sessions and apprenticeships in traditional building crafts.

Relevance to Priority Areas

- Mental Health & Wellbeing:
    - Encouraging a sense of belonging through community heritage projects.
    - Supporting marginalised groups in finding social connections and a sense of safety in their local communities.
    - Strengthening emotional connections to places and stories, which research links to improved mental wellbeing.
- Social Inclusion & Community Engagement:
    - The Diverse Heritage Programme works with marginalised communities to foster integration and representation.
    - The My Place Programme engages young people and migrant communities in photography, community storytelling, and civic projects.
- Sustainability & Climate Action:
    - Public consultation on the climate emergency ensures that heritage strategies align with sustainability goals.

    - Investment in traditional building skills helps protect Scotland's historic environment using sustainable conservation methods.

- Youth Engagement & Skills Development:
    - The My Place Photography Competition encourages young people to engage with their local environment through visual storytelling.
    - The Construction Sector Taster Sessions introduce young people to careers in conservation and heritage-related trades.

Wellbeing Outcomes

- Methodologies:
    - Public Consultation & Community Engagement: National survey and social media engagement shaped the strategy.
    - Heritage-Led Civic Action: Supporting 150 grassroots heritage and civic organisations.
    - Education & Skills Development: Providing training, apprenticeships, and interactive programmes.
- Evaluations:
    - Success will be measured through participation rates, the number of communities benefiting, and qualitative feedback from programme participants.
- Challenges:
    - Ensuring adequate funding and resources for grassroots organisations.
    - Addressing barriers to participation for historically marginalised communities.
    - Balancing the demands of heritage conservation with sustainability and modernisation efforts.
- Future Research:
    - Examining the long-term impact of heritage engagement on community cohesion and mental wellbeing.
    - Assessing the role of heritage skills training in supporting economic and social mobility for young people.

- Exploring how public storytelling initiatives influence perceptions of identity and place.

The Scotland's Places, People, and Their Stories strategy exemplifies how heritage-led initiatives can foster wellbeing, strengthen community bonds, and enhance civic participation. By integrating storytelling, placemaking, and traditional skills training, the Scottish Civic Trust is ensuring that Scotland's heritage remains a vibrant, accessible, and inclusive force for community development over the next five years.

Case Study: THRIVE – The Town Centre First Heritage Revival Scheme (Ireland)

Overview

Project Name: THRIVE – Town Centre First Heritage Revival Scheme

Location: Town centres across Ireland

Lead Organisation(s): Southern Regional Assembly, Northern and Western Regional Assembly

Partner Organisations: Local authorities, European Union, Irish Government

Project Duration: Ongoing (Launched 2024)

Funding Source(s): Irish Government, European Regional Development Fund (ERDF)

Target Audience: Local communities, heritage conservation professionals, business owners, urban planners, and visitors

Primary Heritage Theme

Belonging: The project aims to reinvigorate town centres through heritage-led regeneration, enhancing community identity and attachment to place.

Healing: Restoring vacant heritage buildings fosters community wellbeing by creating social, cultural, and recreational spaces.

Environment: Adaptive reuse of historic buildings aligns with sustainability goals by reducing urban decay and supporting climate resilience.

Keywords

Heritage Regeneration

Urban Wellbeing

Adaptive Reuse

Sustainable Development

Placemaking

Community Engagement

Social Cohesion

Related Fields

Cultural Capital: Strengthening communities by revitalising historic town centres as vibrant cultural and economic hubs.

Behavioural Change: Encouraging sustainable urban living and engagement with historic environments.

Social Inclusion: Involving local citizens and stakeholders in shaping urban development decisions.

Pride of Place: Enhancing civic engagement and ownership by restoring neglected spaces into valuable community assets.

Relevance to Priority Areas

Mental Health & Wellbeing: Converting abandoned buildings into community hubs supports social connectivity and wellbeing.

Social Inclusion & Community Engagement: Citizen participation in urban regeneration fosters inclusivity and strengthens communal bonds.

Sustainability & Climate Action: Adaptive reuse reduces urban waste and promotes environmentally responsible development.

Economic Revitalisation: Restored town centres attract businesses, tourism, and investment, contributing to local economies.

Methodologies:

Participatory Planning: Local communities and stakeholders play a key role in project selection and design.

Town Centre First Framework: A structured approach to revitalising key towns, regional growth centres, and cities.

Evaluations:

Success is measured through increased foot traffic, business activity, community satisfaction, and urban sustainability metrics.

Challenges:

Ensuring projects maintain a balance between conservation and modern functionality.

Securing long-term community engagement beyond initial funding.

Future Research:

Assessing the long-term socio-economic and wellbeing impacts of heritage-led urban revitalisation.

Evaluating how historic town centre regeneration contributes to climate resilience and green urbanism.

The THRIVE scheme represents a significant investment in Ireland’s urban heritage, demonstrating how historic buildings can be repurposed to support wellbeing, economic regeneration, and sustainable development. By fostering local participation and embedding heritage within town planning, THRIVE provides a replicable model for heritage-led urban renewal across Europe.

Case Study: Heritage for Health – A Social Prescribing Project in Northern Ireland

1. Overview

- Project Name: Heritage for Health
- Location: Northern Ireland (Across all five NHS trust areas)
- Lead Organisation(s): Northern Ireland Environment Link
- Partner Organisations: Healthy Living Centre Alliance, National Lottery Heritage Fund
- Project Duration: Ongoing
- Funding Source(s): National Lottery Heritage Fund
- Target Audience: Individuals affected by mental health challenges (particularly post-pandemic), older adults, socially isolated individuals, and those seeking social prescribing interventions

2. Context and Rationale

What was the need or challenge addressed?

The Heritage for Health project was developed to provide mental health recovery opportunities for individuals affected by the pandemic. It sought to bridge the gap between health and heritage through social prescribing, offering participants structured engagement with natural and cultural heritage sites.

The project aimed to address:

- Mental health deterioration caused by social isolation and stress.
- Limited accessibility to nature and heritage for vulnerable populations.
- The need for alternative health interventions beyond traditional clinical approaches.

Why was heritage chosen as an intervention?

Heritage was incorporated as a therapeutic and social tool, enabling participants to:

- Reconnect with place and history, fostering identity and belonging.
- Engage in nature-based wellbeing activities (e.g., forest bathing, foraging).

- Experience social cohesion through shared heritage participation.

By combining cultural heritage with outdoor engagement, the project offered a holistic approach to wellbeing, integrating psychological, social, and physical benefits.

3. Project Description

Aims and Objectives

The project focused on three key heritage themes from Historic England's Wellbeing and Heritage Framework:

1. Belonging – Connecting participants with local heritage and community spaces.
2. Healing – Using nature and heritage as tools for mental health recovery.
3. Environment – Engaging with natural heritage to promote environmental awareness and wellbeing.

Key objectives included:

- Facilitating mental health recovery through structured social prescribing.
- Encouraging social inclusion and reducing loneliness through shared heritage experiences.
- Fostering a deeper connection to local cultural and natural heritage.

Activities and Approach

The project was structured around the Take 5 Steps to Wellbeing Framework: Be Active, Connect, Take Notice, Keep Learning, and Give, integrating:

- Outdoor heritage activities such as forest bathing, foraging, and guided heritage walks.
- Cultural engagement including historical site visits, storytelling, and community heritage discussions.
- Practical conservation and volunteering, enabling participants to contribute to heritage preservation.
- Cold water therapy and nature-based mindfulness practices.
- Social interaction through workshops, group discussions, and shared reflection exercises.

Engagement Methods

- Social prescribing pathways (GP referrals, self-referral, and community organisation referrals).
- Local heritage partnerships ensuring diverse and accessible heritage activities.
- Integration with public health strategies, enabling long-term mental health benefits.

Evaluation Strategy

- Outcome Star methodology to track individual wellbeing progress.
- Pre- and post-participation surveys, incorporating the Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale (WEMWBS).
- Participant testimonials and qualitative case studies.
- Facilitator surveys and external evaluation to assess project effectiveness.

4. Key Wellbeing Outcomes

Psychological Wellbeing

- Improved mental resilience through structured engagement with heritage sites.
- Greater emotional connection to place and community, fostering identity.
- Stress reduction and relaxation, supported by nature-based activities.

Social Wellbeing

- Strengthened community bonds through shared participation in heritage experiences.
- Reduced social isolation via structured group engagement.
- Empowered participants to engage in volunteerism, fostering civic pride.

Cultural and Identity Wellbeing

- Increased awareness and appreciation of local heritage.
- Encouraged intergenerational knowledge sharing.
- Promoted cultural identity through heritage storytelling and site visits.

Physical Wellbeing

- Encouraged outdoor movement and physical activity (e.g., walks, conservation work).

- Supported recovery for individuals with physical health challenges, including chronic conditions.

Long-Term Wellbeing Impacts

- Some participants have transitioned into heritage volunteer roles (e.g., red squirrel conservation).
- Participants report sustained mental health improvements, with continued engagement beyond project completion.

5. Challenges and Lessons Learned

Key Barriers Encountered

- Diverse participant needs required flexible delivery approaches.
- Measuring intangible wellbeing benefits (e.g., emotional recovery) was challenging.
- Ensuring consistency across sessions with multiple heritage partners.

Adaptations and Innovations

- Developed a combined evaluation model, integrating health and heritage impact measurements.
- Extended session lengths and increased flexibility, allowing deeper engagement.
- Leveraged creative storytelling and podcasting, expanding project visibility.

What Worked Well?

- Community-led design ensured activities resonated with participant needs.
- Heritage facilitators collaborated closely with health professionals, improving accessibility.
- Outdoor therapy approaches (forest bathing, foraging) were particularly effective.

Areas for Improvement

- Need for longitudinal tracking to assess long-term wellbeing impact.
- Expanding youth engagement to ensure inclusivity across demographics.

6. Policy and Research Implications

Scalability and Replicability

- The Heritage for Health model can be applied to other community-based social prescribing initiatives.
- The integration of intangible heritage with mental health strategies presents a replicable framework for other regions.

Policy Recommendations

- Strengthen funding support for heritage-based social prescribing, integrating it into public health models.
- Develop standardised wellbeing metrics tailored for heritage interventions.
- Foster interdisciplinary collaboration between heritage professionals and healthcare providers.

Future Research Directions

- Investigate the long-term psychological benefits of heritage-based wellbeing initiatives.
- Explore how climate change narratives in heritage projects affect mental resilience.
- Assess the role of social prescribing in improving health outcomes across different demographic groups.

7. Conclusion

The Heritage for Health project exemplifies the transformative potential of heritage-based social prescribing, demonstrating how natural and cultural heritage can be integrated into mental health recovery strategies. By connecting participants to place, community, and environment, the project has successfully enhanced wellbeing, reduced social isolation, and fostered cultural engagement.

This case study highlights a scalable model for embedding heritage within health policy, providing a foundation for future interdisciplinary wellbeing initiatives.

Case Study: England: The Ripple Effect – A Heritage-Led Wellbeing Initiative

1. Overview

- Project Name: The Ripple Effect
- Location: Salisbury, UK
- Lead Organisation(s): Wessex Archaeology
- Partner Organisations: Environment Agency, artist James Aldridge, Wiltshire Wildlife Trust
- Project Duration: Two years (2022–2024)
- Funding Source(s): Environment Agency
- Target Audience: Local residents, individuals experiencing social isolation, those interested in environmental heritage, and community members new to the area

2. Context and Rationale

What was the need or challenge addressed?

The Ripple Effect was developed in response to the flood risk reduction efforts in Salisbury, specifically the Salisbury River Park Scheme. While the scheme primarily focused on environmental and infrastructure improvements, it also presented an opportunity to engage the local community in understanding the historical and ecological significance of the River Avon.

The project sought to address:

- A lack of public engagement and understanding of the river's history, archaeology, and environmental significance.
- Social isolation and disconnection from place, particularly for new residents.
- The need for innovative approaches to public participation in environmental and heritage projects.

By drawing on heritage, archaeology, and ecology, the project aimed to foster community cohesion and wellbeing through immersive and creative engagement.

Why was heritage chosen as an intervention?

Heritage provided a meaningful framework to explore the interconnections between people, place, and environment. Through archaeology, historical narratives, and community storytelling, the project facilitated:

- A deeper sense of belonging and place attachment for participants.
- An appreciation of the River Avon's long-term significance, reinforcing the themes of resilience and change in both human and natural history.
- Opportunities for interactive learning through archaeological handling sessions, river walks, and environmental storytelling.

3. Project Description

Aims and Objectives

The project had two key phases:

1. Telling the Story of Salisbury's Relationship with the River Avon – exploring themes of people, place, and purpose in the river's history.
2. Becoming a Good Ancestor – focusing on intergenerational responsibility and long-term environmental sustainability.

Key objectives included:

- Enhancing community engagement with the Salisbury River Park Scheme.
- Encouraging personal reflection on the changing landscape and environmental resilience.
- Promoting mental wellbeing through active participation in heritage and ecology.

Activities and Approach

The project was structured around the New Economics Foundation's Five Steps to Wellbeing: Connect, Be Active, Take Notice, Keep Learning, Give. Activities included:

- Walking, observing, and creative mapping exercises to enhance environmental awareness.
- Archaeological object handling (e.g., Palaeolithic hand axes) to discuss 'deep time' and historical continuity.
- Ecological engagement, including fish rescues and vole releases, reinforcing connections between environmental and personal resilience.

- Creative storytelling, art, and photography to enable participants to reflect on their experiences and share their insights with a wider audience.
- Workshops with the Wiltshire Wildlife Trust, focusing on environmental conservation and sustainability.

Engagement Methods

- Guided river walks with geoarchaeologists and ecologists.
- Art-based reflection exercises (cyanotype prints, visual storytelling).
- Social media engagement, allowing participants to become ambassadors for the scheme.

Evaluation Strategy

- Participant feedback through surveys and qualitative interviews.
- Creative documentation (art, photography, written reflections) to capture personal responses.
- Longitudinal tracking of participant experiences and knowledge-sharing within the community.

4. Key Wellbeing Outcomes

Psychological Wellbeing

- Increased personal resilience through engagement with heritage narratives.
- Sense of purpose and belonging, particularly among new residents:
    - "I feel more part of the city. This feels like my home." – Participant
- Greater emotional connection to the environment, reinforcing mindfulness and reflection.

Social Wellbeing

- Strengthened community ties by fostering shared experiences and storytelling.
- Empowered participants as heritage and environmental ambassadors, increasing their role in local discourse:
    - "We've been given a personal insight into the work being undertaken and how this is going to benefit Salisbury for the next half-century." – Participant

Cultural and Identity Wellbeing

- Enhanced historical awareness of the River Avon's role in shaping Salisbury's identity.
- Created an intergenerational dialogue about heritage, climate change, and sustainability.

Physical Wellbeing

- Encouraged active participation through river walks and outdoor activities.
- Promoted 'blue' and 'green' therapy, aligning with research on nature's impact on mental health.

Long-Term Wellbeing Impacts

- Participants became knowledge sharers, passing insights onto family, friends, and online communities.
- The project influenced future Environment Agency engagement strategies, recognizing the value of heritage storytelling in public participation.

5. Challenges and Lessons Learned

Key Barriers Encountered

- Initial scepticism from technical experts who had never worked on a heritage-based wellbeing project.
- Difficulties in conveying complex environmental information in an accessible way.
- Limited public awareness of the Salisbury River Park Scheme at the project's outset.

Adaptations and Innovations

- Heritage storytelling and creative communication techniques were used to simplify and humanize technical content.
- Participants documented their experiences online, increasing outreach beyond the immediate group.

What Worked Well?

- The multidisciplinary approach (heritage + ecology + art) fostered rich engagement and diverse participation.

- Empowering participants as storytellers and ambassadors increased long-term impact.
- Blending archaeological narratives with contemporary environmental concerns created a compelling and relatable experience.

Areas for Improvement

- Need for longer-term participant follow-up to measure sustained impact.
- Expanding outreach to a wider demographic (e.g., younger audiences and ethnically diverse communities).

6. Policy and Research Implications

Scalability and Replicability

- The heritage-wellbeing model used in The Ripple Effect can be replicated in other flood resilience and environmental projects.
- Findings suggest embedding archaeology into climate adaptation strategies could enhance public engagement and wellbeing outcomes.

Policy Recommendations

- Expand funding for heritage-led wellbeing initiatives, recognizing heritage as a wellbeing intervention.
- Develop formal partnerships between heritage organisations and environmental agencies to improve public participation.
- Support interdisciplinary training for archaeologists and environmental professionals to improve engagement methods.

Future Research Directions

- Longitudinal studies to track the sustained impact of heritage-led environmental engagement.
- Investigate the role of ‘blue’ and ‘green’ heritage in mental health strategies.

7. Conclusion

The Ripple Effect successfully demonstrated how heritage, archaeology, and ecology can be integrated into wellbeing interventions, reinforcing personal resilience, environmental stewardship, and social inclusion. By blending scientific, creative, and participatory

methodologies, the project provided a model for future heritage-led engagement strategies, highlighting the potential for archaeology to foster wellbeing in the context of climate resilience and landscape change. This case study illustrates how heritage can serve as a vehicle for mental, social, and cultural wellbeing, offering a replicable model for embedding heritage into environmental and health policy frameworks.

Annexe 3: Key Organisations and Funding

To effectively identify potential key partners driving research on heritage and wellbeing (objective E), and likely to collaborate with Historic England (HE) in the future, we have first used 1) stakeholder mapping and conducted an analysis of research trends in the REA. Secondly, with the expert consultation we have engaged with academic working groups, practitioners (professional networking) and policy-making organisations and individuals through a mix of online surveying and interviews using sector-specific questions. This multiple-angled methodology has helped us establish a thorough and informed list of potential strategic partners.

Overview of funders and institutions involved in heritage-led wellbeing work.

Region	Funding Organisation	Scale of Research/Funding	Nature of Programme/Activity/Funding	Time Period (if known)
England	Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC)	Large-scale funding for heritage and humanities research.	Supports academic and community-led research across a range of disciplines, including heritage, archaeology, and wellbeing.	Ongoing, specific calls each year
England	National Lottery Heritage Fund	Medium to large-scale funding for heritage-related projects.	Provides grants for projects focusing on heritage conservation, community engagement, and well-being outcomes.	Ongoing, with specific application deadlines each year
England	Historic England	Medium-scale funding and research support.	Focuses on the protection, conservation, and research of England's built heritage.	Ongoing, annual funding rounds
England	The Wellcome Trust	Large-scale funding for health-related research, including cultural and mental health aspects.	Funds research into the role of cultural heritage in public health, including the intersection of heritage and mental health.	Ongoing with thematic funding rounds

Scotland	Creative Scotland	Medium to large-scale funding for arts and culture, including heritage projects.	Supports projects that integrate cultural heritage with community and social development.	Ongoing, with specific calls each year
Scotland	The Royal Society of Edinburgh (RSE)	Large-scale funding for heritage and cultural research.	Supports interdisciplinary research, including heritage-led wellbeing and community development projects.	Ongoing, with specific funding rounds
Scotland	National Trust for Scotland	Medium-scale funding for heritage conservation and public engagement.	Funds projects that protect Scotland's heritage while promoting wellbeing and community engagement.	Ongoing, with specific deadlines for project proposals
Northern Ireland	National Lottery Heritage Fund (Northern Ireland)	Medium to large-scale funding for heritage-related projects.	Funds projects focusing on the preservation, engagement, and social impact of heritage sites, including community-driven initiatives.	Ongoing, specific calls and deadlines
Northern Ireland	The Arts Council of Northern Ireland	Medium-scale funding for arts and cultural heritage projects.	Supports a wide range of cultural heritage projects, including those that address social issues such as mental health and community cohesion.	Ongoing, with specific funding rounds
Northern Ireland	Ulster Heritage	Small to medium-scale funding for the preservation of local heritage.	Focuses on preserving and promoting the archaeology and heritage of Northern Ireland, with a focus on public engagement.	Ongoing, with occasional project-specific funding
Wales	Cadw	Medium to large-scale funding for heritage conservation.	Supports heritage projects that focus on protecting, promoting, and researching historic environments in Wales.	Ongoing, specific calls each year
Wales	National Lottery Heritage Fund (Wales)	Large-scale funding for heritage and community-focused projects.	Provides funding for projects that use heritage as a vehicle for social improvement and wellbeing.	Ongoing, specific calls each year

Wales	The Heritage Lottery Fund (Wales)	Medium-scale funding for regional heritage projects.	Supports projects that promote public understanding and engagement with Welsh heritage.	Ongoing, with specific deadlines for applications
Wales	Welsh Government - Heritage and Wellbeing Projects	Large-scale funding for heritage conservation with wellbeing focus.	Supports the integration of heritage conservation with health and social care agendas in Wales.	Ongoing, with specific funding rounds
Ireland	Irish Research Council (IRC)	Large-scale funding for research across multiple disciplines.	Supports research into heritage, archaeology, and related disciplines, including studies on heritage's role in wellbeing.	Ongoing, with annual funding cycles
Ireland	Heritage Council	Medium to large-scale funding for heritage projects.	Provides funding for heritage conservation projects and studies linking heritage with community engagement, wellbeing, and sustainability.	Ongoing, with specific deadlines
Ireland	The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA)	Medium-scale funding for environmental and heritage projects.	Funds research into environmental heritage, sustainable practices, and community well-being connected to heritage preservation.	Ongoing, with specific thematic calls
Ireland	National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS)	Medium scale funding for conservation and heritage projects.	Provides funding for projects related to the conservation of natural heritage, with an emphasis on community engagement and wellbeing.	Ongoing, with project-specific calls
Ireland	National Monuments Service (NMS)	Medium to large-scale funding for conservation and heritage projects.	Provides funding for projects related to the conservation of archaeological heritage, with benefits to community engagement and wellbeing,	Ongoing, with project-specific calls annually

Ireland	National Built Heritage Service (NMS)	Small-large scale funding for conservation and heritage projects.	Provides funding for projects related to the conservation of architectural heritage, with benefits to community engagement and wellbeing	Ongoing, with project-specific calls annually
Ireland	Local Government (various)	Small-medium scale funding for conservation and heritage projects	Provide funding for projects related to the conservation of cultural heritage, with benefits to community engagement and wellbeing.	

Annexe 4: Expert Consultation Instruments

- Sample questions for survey and interviews.
- Workshop topics covered.

Questionnaire targeted at Practitioners

This questionnaire is aimed at practitioners who are directly involved in implementing or managing heritage-based wellbeing initiatives, with the goal of understanding the practical challenges, the impact of their work, and recommendations for improving outcomes.

Background and Role

1. What is your primary role in heritage and wellbeing projects?

Project Manager

Community Engagement Coordinator

Fundraiser

Heritage Educator

Other (please specify) _____

2. What types of heritage-based wellbeing projects do you work on? (Select all that apply)

Social inclusion programs

Mental health support initiatives

Cultural regeneration projects

Community-led heritage education

Other (please specify) _____

Projects and Activities

3. Can you provide examples of heritage-based projects that you've worked on that aimed to improve wellbeing? Please briefly describe the project and its impact.

4. What types of interventions or activities have you found most effective in promoting wellbeing outcomes? (Select all that apply)

Heritage education and workshops

Community arts projects

Heritage site accessibility initiatives

Social and cultural heritage events

Other (please specify) _____

5. Which groups do you focus on when implementing these projects? (Select all that apply)

Young people

Older people

Urban communities

Rural communities

Marginalised or vulnerable groups

Other (please specify) _____

Challenges

6. What are the biggest challenges you face when implementing heritage-based wellbeing initiatives?

Limited funding

Lack of community engagement

Insufficient evidence of impact

Resistance from heritage sector or community stakeholders

Other (please specify) _____

Evaluation

7. How do you assess the impact of your heritage-based wellbeing projects?

Feedback surveys from participants

Long-term follow-up surveys

Focus groups with participants

Collaboration with researchers to evaluate impact

Other (please specify) _____

8. What do you see as the key barriers to evaluating the effectiveness of heritage-led wellbeing projects?

Lack of standardised evaluation tools

Limited resources for evaluation

Difficulty in tracking long-term impact

Other (please specify) _____

Collaboration

9. Have you been part of any collaborations that have helped enhance the impact of heritage-led wellbeing initiatives?

Yes

No

If yes, what were the key factors that made the collaboration successful?

Future Sustainability

10. What factors do you think are essential for the long-term sustainability of heritage-based wellbeing initiatives?

Longer-term funding sources

Community engagement

Policy support

Evaluation and impact measurement tools

Other (please specify) _____

Final Insights

11. Do you have any additional thoughts or recommendations on how heritage can better contribute to wellbeing in your community?

12. Would you be interested in:

    a. a follow-up interview in January

    b. participating in a workshop in February

End of questionnaire

Questionnaire targeted at policy-makers

Background and Role

1. What is your primary role in heritage and wellbeing initiatives?

Policy Advisor

Government official

Local authority representative

Fundraiser

Other (please specify) _____

2. In your view, what types of heritage-led wellbeing initiatives are most relevant to policy priorities in your area? (Select all that apply)

Social inclusion programs

Mental health support initiatives

Cultural regeneration projects

Community-led heritage education

Other (please specify) _____

Projects and Activities

3. What are the key challenges you face when creating or implementing policies to support heritage-led wellbeing initiatives?

Difficulty measuring impact

Lack of engagement from local communities

Complexity of cross-sector collaboration

Lack of policy alignment across sectors (e.g., health, education)

Other (please specify) _____

4. What types of groups are most in need of heritage-based wellbeing initiatives in your jurisdiction? (Select all that apply)

Young people

Older people

Urban communities

Rural communities

Marginalised groups

Other (please specify) _____

Collaboration

5. Have you seen successful collaborations between different sectors (e.g., heritage, health, education, social services) that enhance the impact of heritage-led wellbeing projects?

Yes

No

Not sure

If yes, please provide an example: _____

6. What barriers exist to collaboration between the sectors mentioned above? (Select all that apply)

Lack of funding

Different organisational priorities

Regulatory challenges

Limited understanding of the value of heritage in wellbeing

Other (please specify) _____

Future Sustainability

7. What policy changes would help improve the sustainability of heritage-led wellbeing projects in the long term? (Select all that apply)

More funding opportunities

Clearer policy frameworks and guidelines

Greater recognition of heritage as a resource for wellbeing

Long-term investment strategies

Other (please specify) _____

Final Insights

Do you have any additional thoughts or insights on how heritage can contribute to wellbeing in the future?

9. Would you be interested in:

   a. a follow-up interview in January

   b. participating in a workshop in February

end of questionnaire

Questionnaire targeted at researchers

This questionnaire is designed to gather insights from researchers who are involved in the study of heritage-led wellbeing initiatives, focusing on their role in evaluating impact and providing evidence to guide policy and practice.

Background and Role

1. What is your primary role in heritage and wellbeing research?

Researcher

Research coordinator/ research project manager

Data analyst

Policy researcher

Other (please specify) _____

2. Which of the following areas have you focused on in your research related to heritage and wellbeing recently? (Select all that apply)

Social inclusion through heritage

Mental health and wellbeing through cultural activities

Cultural regeneration and its social impacts

Heritage education for health and social integration

Other (please specify) _____

Projects and Activities

3. Could you share an example of a research project that has explored the relationship between heritage and wellbeing? (Briefly describe the project, its aims, and its findings)

4. How do you evaluate the wellbeing outcomes of heritage-based projects?

Surveys/interviews with participants

Longitudinal studies

Health indicators (e.g., mental health measures, social cohesion)

Community feedback and participation

Other (please specify) _____

Evaluation

5. What metrics or tools have you found to be most effective in evaluating the impact of heritage on wellbeing?

Wellbeing scales (e.g., Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale)

Social Return on Investment (SROI)

Qualitative interviews

Pre- and post-assessments

Other (please specify) _____

6. In your experience, what are the challenges in measuring the impact of heritage on wellbeing?

Difficulty in capturing long-term effects

Lack of standardised metrics

Variability in project design and context

Other (please specify) _____

Collaboration

7. Have you collaborated with policymakers or practitioners in your research on heritage-led wellbeing initiatives?

Yes

No

If yes, what was the nature of the collaboration? _____

8. What improvements in collaboration between researchers, practitioners, and policymakers would strengthen the impact of heritage-led wellbeing initiatives?

More interdisciplinary research

Enhanced data sharing and accessibility

Greater engagement with communities in research

Other (please specify) _____

Future Sustainability

9. How can funding bodies better support research into heritage-led wellbeing initiatives? (Select all that apply)

Providing more targeted grants

Supporting long-term research projects

Fostering cross-sectoral partnerships in research

Other (please specify) _____

Final Insights

10. Do you have any additional thoughts or recommendations on how future research can contribute to enhancing the impact of heritage on wellbeing?

Annexe 5: Profile summary of experts interviewed February 2025.

Interviewee	Expertise	Key Contributions	Policy Recommendations
Interviewee01	Archaeology, Heritage Management	Concerns about instrumentalising public involvement; intergenerational impact of heritage; wellbeing as subjective; need for cross-sector collaboration.	Wellbeing interventions need training and expertise; cross-sector collaboration is key; duty of care in heritage projects.
Interviewee02	Archaeology, Mental Health	Wellbeing projects and their unique selling points; sector-specific evaluation challenges; need for a focus group to articulate impact.	Sector-specific evaluation model; co-creation for knowledge and wellbeing impact; longitudinal impact capture.
Interviewee03	Arts, Wellbeing, Mental Health	Use of bespoke evaluation models; importance of external evaluators; staff support in wellbeing projects.	Development of appropriate evaluation models; recognition of staff needs; importance of cross-sector collaboration.
Interviewee04	Field Archaeology, Cultural Value	Challenges of measuring impact; need for longitudinal research; diversity in heritage experiences.	Work with cross-sector bodies; encourage longitudinal research; use co-creation effectively.
Interviewee05	Architecture, Community Co-creation	Challenges of capturing intangible benefits; role of place in wellbeing; community mapping for values.	Use mapping tools to identify community values; align heritage with built environment outcomes; advocacy efforts.

Interviewee06 **Interviewee07**	Heritage Policy & Funding	Desire to leverage wellbeing impact for funding; lack of research focus in heritage-led wellbeing; need for tested evaluation methodologies.	Support toolkit and guidance for organisations; establish wellbeing indicators; model best practices.
Interviewee08	Lived Experience in Heritage Wellbeing	Belief in structured 'wellbeing journeys'; concerns about unfit evaluation models; push for interdisciplinary collaboration.	Encourage structured evaluation strategies; emphasise interdisciplinary approaches; facilitate collaboration.
Interviewee09	Museum Heritage, Arts & Health	Differentiating heritage-led from wellbeing-led projects; resource challenges; need for advocacy and leadership support.	Encourage smart collaboration to maximise wellbeing outcomes; develop unified evaluation tools; co-create assessment frameworks.

Annexe 6. Strategic research priorities: short- and mid-Term focus on key areas

The role of heritage in wellbeing is increasingly recognized, yet significant gaps remain in empirical research and evidence-based policy integration. While heritage engagement fosters social inclusion, mental health resilience, and cultural identity, its potential is underexplored in key areas, particularly community archaeology, heritage-based mental health interventions, and the wellbeing impact of craftsmanship and artisan work.

By identifying and addressing these gaps, heritage can be repositioned as a key component of health and social policy, rather than remaining a secondary or informal contributor to wellbeing initiatives. The proposed short- and mid-term research priorities will generate robust data that strengthens the case for integrating heritage engagement into public health, education, and workforce development strategies.

This section presents three key research areas that require targeted investigation. Each of these areas represents a crucial intersection between heritage, social wellbeing, and public health, providing a structured approach to advancing interdisciplinary research and policy impact:

1. Community archaeology: Understanding its potential to enhance social connectivity, identity formation, and mental resilience through active participation in excavation and site preservation.
2. Heritage and mental health: Evaluating the therapeutic benefits of heritage-based interventions, including museum therapy, social prescribing, and site-based therapeutic activities.
3. The impact of craftsmanship and artisan work on wellbeing: Exploring the role of heritage craft skills in mental health, employment pathways, and cognitive function.

By prioritising these research areas, the heritage sector can develop scalable models for wellbeing interventions, enhance policy recognition, and position heritage as a long-term solution for improving mental health and social cohesion. Each research priority includes specific objectives, proposed pilot studies, and expected policy contributions.

1) Community archaeology: understanding its wellbeing and social Benefits

Rationale

Community archaeology fosters social inclusion, skill development, and community engagement. However, research gaps remain regarding its long-term psychological, social, and economic benefits, particularly for disadvantaged or marginalised communities.

Short-Term Research Priorities (1-2 years)

- Conduct qualitative case studies on the immediate impact of participation in community archaeology projects.
- Develop wellbeing assessment tools specifically for community archaeology initiatives (e.g., participant interviews, surveys, psychological wellbeing scales).
- Examine barriers to participation in community archaeology, focusing on underrepresented groups.

Mid-Term Research Priorities (3-5 years)

- Longitudinal study tracking participants in community archaeology programs over multiple years to assess sustained social and wellbeing benefits.
- Develop a framework for evaluating community archaeology's impact on social cohesion, identity formation, and mental wellbeing.
- Investigate the potential for social prescribing—can doctors and mental health professionals refer individuals to community archaeology as a form of therapeutic intervention?

2) Heritage and mental health: developing evidence-based interventions

Rationale

Heritage engagement, including museum therapy, historic site visits, and storytelling, is increasingly recognized as a therapeutic tool. However, empirical research on its effectiveness in clinical and non-clinical mental health settings is limited.

Short-Term Research Priorities (1-2 years)

- Conduct a systematic review of existing research on heritage-based mental health interventions globally.
- Pilot museum-based object handling as a therapy for individuals with anxiety, depression, and dementia.
- Assess the feasibility of integrating heritage into social prescribing pathways, working with general practitioners and community health services.

Mid-Term Research Priorities (3-5 years)

- Expand clinical trials to compare the effectiveness of heritage-based interventions vs. *traditional* mental health therapies (e.g., cognitive-behavioural therapy, music therapy).
- Explore how different heritage experiences (e.g., guided historic site visits, storytelling, digital heritage, tangible object interactions) affect mental health in distinct ways.
- Develop training programs for mental health professionals to incorporate heritage into therapeutic practice.

3) The impact of craftsmanship and artisan work on wellbeing

Rationale

Traditional crafts—such as woodworking, blacksmithing, weaving, and stone carving—are deeply linked to heritage, identity, and personal wellbeing. However, little research has explored their role in improving mental health, community resilience, and skill development.

Short-Term Research Priorities (1-2 years)

- Examine the psychological and emotional benefits of engaging in heritage craftwork, particularly among older adults and young people not in education or employment (NEETs).
- Conduct case studies of existing heritage-based craft initiatives (e.g., traditional craft workshops, apprenticeships).
- Identify barriers to participation in heritage craft programs (e.g., cost, accessibility, gender biases).

Mid-Term Research Priorities (3-5 years)

- Explore the potential of heritage crafts in employment pathways, particularly for disadvantaged groups.
- Investigate the impact of craft-based work on cognitive function, memory, and dementia care.
- Develop an integrated heritage-craft wellbeing model that can be adapted for mental health interventions, social enterprise programs, and education curricula.

Policy Impact: This research could inform heritage skills programs, workforce development strategies, and social inclusion initiatives in craft heritage sectors.

A roadmap for strategic research

Each of these three research areas represents a crucial intersection between heritage, social wellbeing, and public health. To ensure the success of these research priorities, Historic England, Ireland's heritage authorities, universities, and public health institutions should collaborate on interdisciplinary studies, leveraging longitudinal methodologies and community-driven approaches. By demonstrating the real-world benefits of heritage engagement, these research priorities can help shape the future of heritage-led wellbeing strategies for generations to come.

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