



Welsh Government: Connected Communities: Tackling Loneliness and Social Isolation

Icon Response

14/01/2019

Icon, The Institute of Conservation, welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Welsh Government's [consultation](#) on tackling loneliness and social isolation. Icon is of the view that engagement with cultural heritage and conservation holds great potential to build resilient communities and individuals. Icon urges the government to support social prescribing and collaborative projects across the arts and health and social care sectors.

Icon is a registered charity and the professional body for the conservation of our cultural heritage. Icon raises awareness of the cultural, social and economic value of caring for heritage and champions high standards of conservation. We represent nearly 3,000 individuals and organisations comprising professional conservators, heritage scientists and many others who share a commitment to improving understanding of and access to our cultural heritage.

Question 2: How can we help people to understand the trigger points for loneliness and social isolation and to build emotional and psychological resilience to enable them to take steps to avoid or reduce these feelings?

There is a growing body of evidence to support the argument that engagement with the arts and culture contribute to health and wellbeing and can help prevent and mitigate social isolation and loneliness.¹ The conservation of cultural heritage holds great potential to supporting a loneliness strategy as a sector that engages people in their heritage.

Engagement with cultural heritage can cultivate a strong sense of place and identity (individual or communal) through our shared past. Heritage brings communities together across generational, ethnic and socio-economic divides. The conservation of heritage ensures that this heritage is protected, cared for and made accessible. It enables heritage sites and collections to serve as focal points for the interaction of people and communities.

As discussed in the consultation, volunteering can improve mental health and mitigate feelings of loneliness. The heritage sector has a sizeable volunteering workforce, with 616,000 heritage volunteers in England alone.² In 2017-18, 475 people volunteered their time with Icon, spending approximately 6,000 hours supporting our activities.

¹ https://www.artshealthandwellbeing.org.uk/appg-inquiry/Publications/Creative_Health_Inquiry_Report_2017_-_Second_Edition.pdf

² <https://historicengland.org.uk/content/heritage-counts/pub/2018/heritage-and-the-economy-2018/>

Volunteering projects in conservation often involve professionally-led training and learning to ensure that the heritage asset is conserved and cared for with the appropriate skills. Such projects can significantly empower people by helping individuals to gain new skills, fill gaps in their knowledge and build confidence.

We advocate for the strategy to recognise the potential that cultural heritage and conservation hold to tackle loneliness and isolation. We believe government commitment to social prescribing and funding for collaborative projects across the arts and health and social care sectors could have a meaningful impact on the resilience of people and communities.

Question 3: How can the Welsh Government foster the right environment and create the right conditions to build resilient communities?

The proposed strategy is a welcome and important step to fostering resilient communities. Icon believes that for the strategy to achieve maximum benefit, it should prioritise measures to increase access to and engagement with arts, culture and heritage. For example, social prescribing could be used to increase the number of lonely and isolated people that the heritage sector is able to engage in its activities. We have included case studies of successful projects in Question 19.

Question 12: In what other ways can health services play their part in reducing loneliness and social isolation?

Icon welcomes the Welsh Government's social prescription pilot scheme and advocates for conservation projects to be included amongst the funded initiatives in recognition of the sector's potential to reduce loneliness and isolation.

We advocate for all relevant health institutions to embrace the potential that the arts and cultural heritage hold in supporting health services. Institutions could designate an individual to take responsibility to ensure the arts are integrated within organisational policy and that there is a framework for engaging local arts and heritage organisations in the delivery of health and wellbeing.

Leaders in the health and social care sector could collaborate with leaders within the heritage sector to advance good practice, promote collaboration, coordinate and disseminate research and inform policy. Health and social care providers should strive to ensure that relevant practitioners and medical students and trainees are educated in the benefits of the arts and their practical applicability to the mental health agenda, for example through professional development modules and the provision of community-based projects.

Question 14: How can the Third sector play a stronger role in helping to tackle loneliness and social isolation? What can the Welsh Government and other public bodies do to support this?

We recommend local arts and heritage organisations are invited to promote the opportunities and benefits of engagement with arts and cultural heritage to the public and health service providers and schools. This is to raise the profile of the sector and its potential, to encourage public demand and to foster greater collaboration between arts and health professionals.

We appeal to government and funders to support collaborative projects and initiatives as a lack of funding can prevent third sector arts and heritage organisations from helping to deliver valuable health and social services. Icon also urges the Ministers for Culture, Tourism and Sport, Health and Social Services and Education to collaborate on a policy for the arts in health, which could include actions to establish a council comprising leaders across government and within the arts and health sectors to advance practice and research.

Question 18: Do you agree with our proposed approach? If not, what would you otherwise suggest?

Icon agrees with the proposed approach.

We strongly believe the strategy should be cross-governmental. We recommend a close relationship with the arts, culture and heritage sectors in the strategy's delivery in recognition of the contribution that the sectors make to tackling loneliness and isolation.

Question 19: Are you aware of examples of successful interventions within Wales, or beyond, that you think we should be looking at?

Icon's **Conservation in the Community Award** marked the valuable efforts and excellence achieved by volunteers on conservation projects. It is presented to a project involving a professional conservator who has increased the learning of new skills by volunteers and benefited communities in accessing cultural heritage.

In 2015 the award was given to '**Resurrecting the Coffin Works**', the Birmingham Conservation Trust's rescue of a Victorian factory building along with its contents in a very deprived area of Birmingham. The project combined high conservation standards with excellent community engagement and public access where none previously existed.

The project provided volunteers with an opportunity to gain new skills, greater confidence and to learn about conservation. It increased social cohesion and inclusion by allowing the community to contribute to the conservation of an aspect of their heritage that had been previously inaccessible through its semi-derelict state. The factory now offers a range of community events, ensuring the site's continued contribution to wellbeing and education in the community. The restored building adds to the character of its setting, improving quality of life in the area.

The project demonstrates the positive impact of conservation projects on community engagement and education and their potential to mitigate and prevent loneliness and isolation.

The Restoration Trust's **Human Henge** project improved participants' mental health by providing high quality, small group experiences of archaeology and historic landscapes.³ The Restoration Trust supports people to engage with heritage and culture to improve mental health. 36 local adults accessing mental health services were invited to experience Stonehenge and Avebury through walking and discussion, as part of a flexible, creative 10 week programme. Due to ill health or lack of financial resources, many of the participants had not previously felt confident to visit these iconic landscapes.

Change Minds is a transformative archival adventure for people from North Norfolk and Norwich who live with mental health conditions and are on low incomes, carers, volunteers and staff. Researching two digitised 19th Century Norfolk County Asylum Case Books at Norfolk Record Office and Norwich Millennium Library, Change Minds engages local people and online visitors in the stories it reveals during a fascinating investigation into local heritage, mental health and identity.

Links to further information:

Icon website www.icon.org.uk

³ <https://www.hlf.org.uk/our-projects/human-henge-historic-landscapes-and-mental-health-stonehenge>