

# Historic England

## Wellbeing and heritage strategy

2025-2030



# Foreword

From the extraordinary to the everyday, our historic places and spaces matter – to you, to us, to the nation. From community centres to cathedrals, homes to highstreets, markets to mills – they are the places we all choose to hold onto, the legacy we want to pass on and the stories we continue to tell.

Heritage is one of our most valuable national assets. It drives growth by creating an environment where people want to live, work and visit. It inspires the creative industries, and it is our shop front to the world. Just as importantly, heritage boosts civic pride and acts as a focal point to bring communities together and give them confidence about the future. The history that surrounds us all needs to live on and be loved for longer precisely because it makes us happier, healthier and more secure today.

When we stand up for heritage, we improve people's lives. This Heritage and Wellbeing Strategy is our commitment to continuing to make this happen.

**Neil Mendoza, Chairman**



Happier Festival Shrewsbury Flaxmill Maltings

# Introduction

Over the past three years we have been gathering evidence to understand how heritage improves people's lives and the social impact it brings. We know heritage creates belonging, social connection and provides restorative environments for people. Healthy places help create healthy populations and healthy populations create prosperity; heritage is a vital element in making places work for people now and in the future. It is also what people want: A Britain Thinks survey found that 81% of people said that 'looking after historic buildings, monuments and archaeology to safeguard the places people love' was personally important to them. Heritage is all around us and everyone can access it, which means better outcomes are available for everyone.

If just being surrounded by heritage increases our collective wellbeing, then the benefits of actively engaging with it are even greater. From the older person taking part in a reminiscence workshop, to a student collecting oral histories, a retired person volunteering in an archive or at a heritage site, through to a school child discovering the remarkable history on their doorstep, active participation in heritage results in impressive health and wellbeing outcomes. We know heritage builds connections within communities, supports mental health, builds pride in place, increases confidence and self-belief, and strengthens resilience. When people are empowered to shape changes in the places local to them, it leads to greater social trust and cohesion.

We know that if we work in partnership with communities, organisations, local authorities and with other public sector bodies, heritage can and will help improve people's lives. We also recognise that aspects of our past can be challenging. Not all heritage is positive, but when maintained and engaged with thoughtfully, it can support healing, identity, and trust.



Staff outside Shrewsbury Flaxmill Maltings at the Happier Festival. A day of creative activities, community connection, health and fitness.

To deliver this potential, the next phase of our strategy will focus on two areas: understanding how place contributes to the protective or restorative factors for health and wellbeing; and how and where heritage can create the most impact for the people and places that need it the most. Wellbeing isn't one-size-fits-all. We must understand what works, for whom, and in what context. We will do this through creative partnerships, and by sharing our knowledge and insight and offering practical resources that support heritage's role in delivering social value.

Improving wellbeing requires deep collaboration. Needs vary, and communities face unequal challenges. We bring heritage knowledge to the table, but we cannot do this alone. We will work with others to reduce inequalities and increase access to heritage and its benefits.

**Ian Morrison, Director of Policy and Evidence**

# What will this strategy achieve?

This strategy is a clear statement of our commitment to improving lives through heritage. It offers a framework to connect people with heritage in ways that enhance wellbeing.

Wellbeing can be supported in a broad sense through community environments, and in a targeted way by addressing unmet needs. This strategy aligns with our corporate goals and reflects our commitment to inclusion, diversity, and access.

This strategy builds on three years of experience and outlines a five-year implementation plan.

## We will:

- **Remove barriers** to participation and access to heritage, particularly for underserved communities.
- **Expand opportunities** to use heritage to tackle health inequalities.
- **Enhance people, power and place** through heritage.
- **Support healthy environments** by protecting and improving places and landscapes.
- **Build evidence** about what works, for whom, and why.



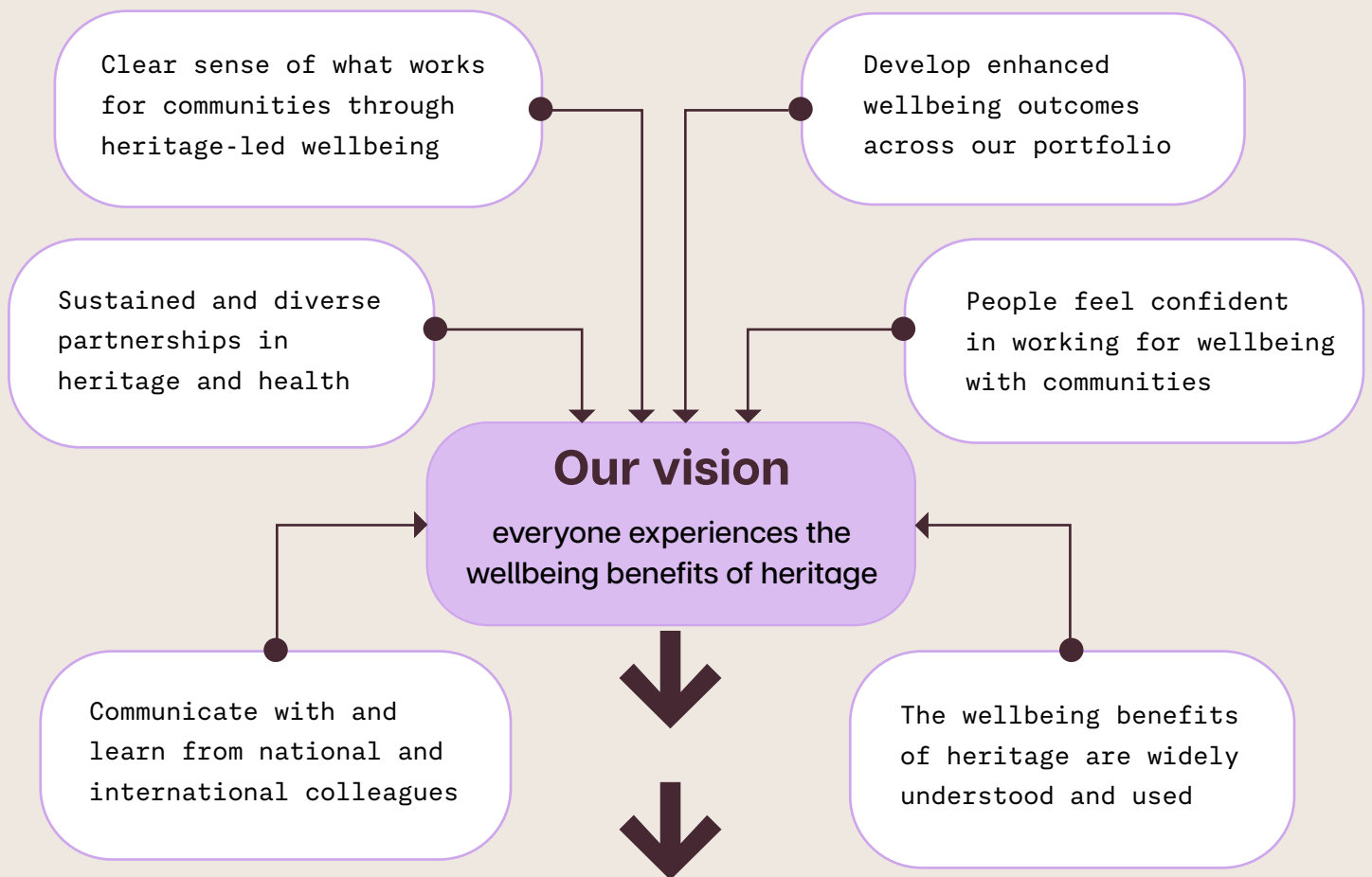
Proprietor of a patisserie and bakery  
Bedford Heritage Action Zone

Our work in wellbeing is a collaboration. All our progress to date has come from shared effort with partners. Going forward, we aim to learn and grow together, applying heritage to meet wellbeing challenges with focus and purpose.

### Our theory of change still guides us.

Understanding what works and with whom leads to better outcomes and stronger confidence in our people and partners. This strategy builds on that foundation with refined aims and objectives for greater clarity and relevance.

## Theory of change



Corporate priorities

# What do we mean by wellbeing?

As per the What Works for Wellbeing Centre's definition, "wellbeing is how we're doing as individuals, communities and as a nation, and how sustainable that is for the future".

Wellbeing is a 'threat multiplier.' If it is left unaddressed it will lead to greater inequality in education and opportunity, more poverty and more social and individual discontentment. These circumstances can have a negative impact on national health costs, growth, productivity and security – and most crucially people's health and social trust.

Wellbeing is complex, values-based, dynamic and multi-faceted – but two relevant aspects are:

## 01 Social determinants of wellbeing

These are the factors that contribute towards a person's potential for wellbeing and their ability to flourish. They apply at the individual level (lifestyle factors), the collective level (how well a community is doing) and the population level (wider socio-economic conditions) and can often be objective.

The Everyday Heritage Grants are for projects that celebrate working class histories. One of the performers at the Gay Stoke Rehearsal, Stoke-on-Trent.

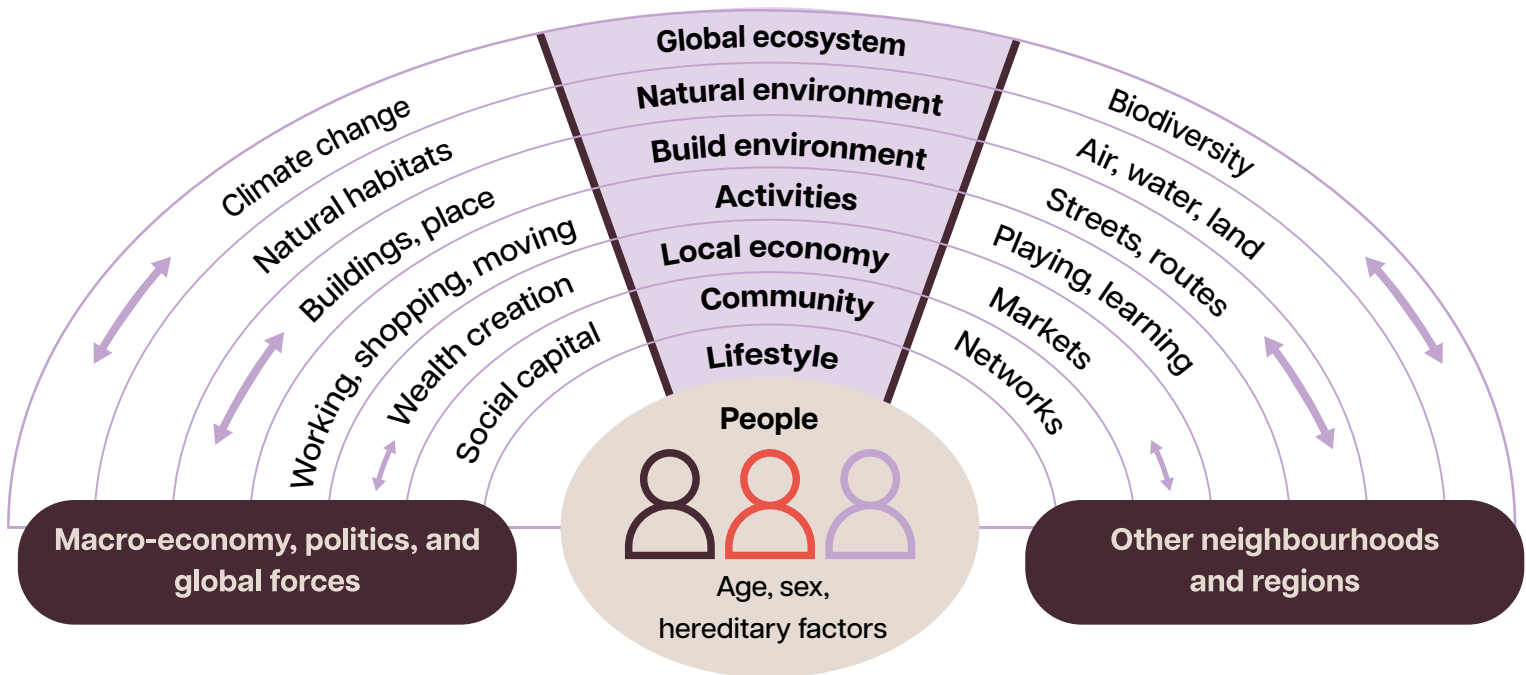
## 02 Subjective wellbeing

This is an individual's own cognitive and affective evaluation of their life. It includes our health and emotional resilience, our supportive social relationships and our feeling of relevance and social justice; at the highest level, this is about how well we feel we are doing in our own lives. Wellbeing in this context is personal and subjective, and universally relevant.

There are multiple opportunities within the cultural heritage sector to support these two key aspects of wellbeing. Our role is to show how heritage can be instrumental to national wellbeing.



## The determinants of health and well-being in our neighbourhoods



Kite making and flying workshop. Part of Dover's Western Heights Regeneration project that has received capacity building grant funding from Historic England.

# How does heritage help?

This strategy is grounded in one core belief: heritage helps.



- Fosters identity and belonging.
- Increases life-satisfaction.
- Builds mental resilience and skills.
- Counters loneliness and encourages trust.
- Supports creativity, movement, and reflection.
- It strengthens connections within communities.
- It links us to our collective stories and inspires pride of place.
- And it's everywhere – accessible and personal to everyone.

Heritage is more than buildings or artifacts. It includes the stories, memories, and traditions that shape our lives. Because it is everywhere and meaningful to everyone, heritage can play a powerful role in improving wellbeing.

We believe:

- **Heritage is opportunity:** for creativity connection, and personal growth.
- **Heritage is personal:** it meets individuals where they are.
- **Heritage is universal:** everyone can benefit from engagement with place and the past.

By seeing heritage through a wellbeing lens, we can unlock its full potential to improve lives.

Wellbeing relates both to how individuals and communities feel and operate. It can be protected

and enhanced. Meaning it can be supported at a population and community level by providing the environment and enablers for a healthy life, and it can be a way to address social inequalities through considering particular benefits for those with unmet needs or struggling through systemic inequity. We will articulate the following through our work:

- **Protecting and enhancing places:** Heritage enablers for the protective factors for health and wellbeing.
- **Addressing community needs:** Heritage-led approaches to addressing health and wellbeing inequalities.

Together this approach will show how heritage can be instrumental to national wellbeing.



# Vision

Everyone experiences the wellbeing benefits of heritage.

In order to achieve this mission we will facilitate the role of heritage in benefitting the wellbeing of more people in a better way. We are here to protect and revitalise the historic environment because it contributes to quality of place and connects us to others.

Above: Volunteer station master, Weybourne Railway Station, Norfolk.

# Objectives

## 01 Aim: Delivery

**Increase the connection between people and place through our delivery.**

We've begun integrating wellbeing into our operations – from grants to projects – but there's more to do.

### We will:

- **Amplify** our wellbeing impact by understanding needs in people and places to show how heritage investment delivers public benefit.
- **Expand** opportunities through building insight and embedded evaluation practices.

### Priority activities:

- **Community and place-based work:** exploring the application of people-centred approaches.
- **Exemplars:** Proof of concepts and working models of how wellbeing can support and develop our delivery.
- **Operational practice:** Demonstrating collective wellbeing outcomes in community-led delivery and working with opportunities in systems and practices.
- **Social impact evaluation:** testing evidence gathering to refine and build data.

## 02 Aim: Evidence

**Create and expand our understanding of heritage-led wellbeing through evidence.**

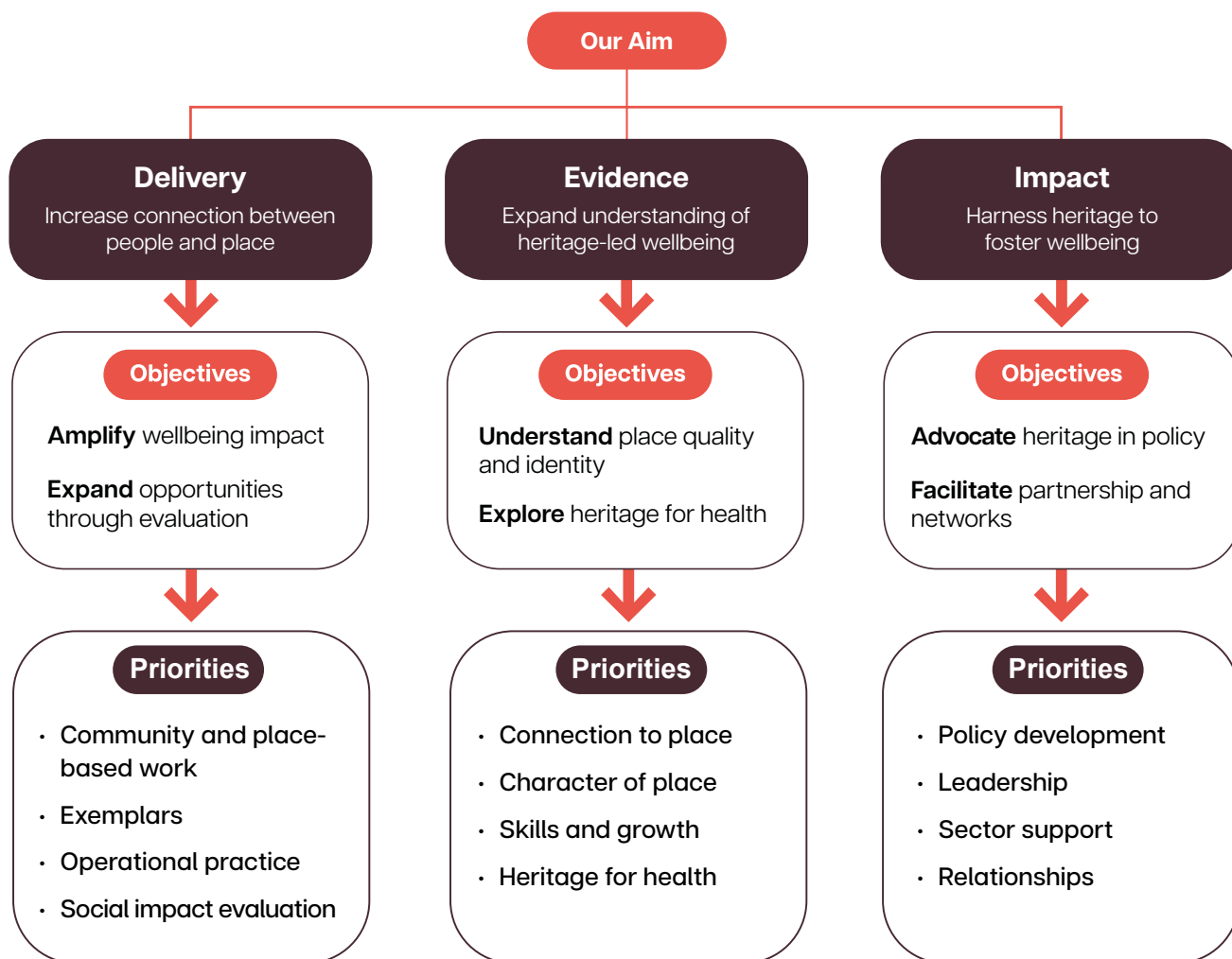
The evidence linking heritage and wellbeing has grown quickly. We will now focus on making more of what we have and on evidence gaps – to be articulated with the new Historic England research agenda – with real-world impact and through evaluation.

### We will:

- **Understand** how place quality, care, and identity support population wellbeing, including pride, belonging, and cohesion and how to address barriers to access.
- **Explore** heritage activities and assets to study how heritage-based activities and skills and heritage assets support health, particularly for those most in need.

### Priority activities:

- **Connection to place:** explore why places are important through emotional connection.
- **Character of place:** how historic environments and their role in place provide protective factors for health.
- **Skills and growth:** how education and skills are developed by heritage.
- **Heritage for health:** how specific programmes work best for particular health needs.



03

## Aim: Impact

**Harness the power of heritage to enrich communities and foster wellbeing to create a lasting positive impact.**

We've seen how heritage can shift perceptions – such as through our work with the National Academy of Social Prescribing. Now, we need to demonstrate impact in new and evolving contexts.

### We will:

- **Advocate** for heritage as a vehicle for wellbeing and capacity to influence policy through leadership and best practice.
- **Facilitate** and strengthen partnerships across sectors, build networks and sector skills to increase the availability and reach of heritage-led wellbeing work.

### Priority activities:

- **Policy development:** creating bodies of evidence applicable to major policy areas and historic environment priorities.
- **Leadership:** showcasing work with others to promote our role in leading on how heritage supports wellbeing.
- **Sector support:** collaborative working with the heritage sector to maximise our collective offer and evidence base and support social prescribing.
- **Relationships:** Building new partnerships to expand knowledge and building understanding of the public value of heritage especially in health and wellbeing organisations.

# Context

## Social drivers for change

Improving wellbeing means understanding people and place. We must advocate a ‘people and heritage-led’ approach guided by current social needs. We will work with the heritage sector to articulate the benefits of heritage in these four areas through the work set out in our three aims – that is the opportunities provided by our work and that by the heritage sector.

For each there is the potential to look at how heritage and the historic environment can contribute to a supportive environment that helps our life satisfaction and wellbeing (protective factors) and how it can be designed and tailored to meet particular needs within communities (response to community need).

## Understanding levels of need

As we all work to consider wellbeing, we can consider a three-tier wellbeing model aimed to help with planning the aims and objectives of projects and programmes – it is a tool for considering how to work and where to make a difference. This enables work by us and others to be intentional and focused and helps design evaluations from the outset by linking it to clear objectives.

- **Thriving:** when we are thriving, we have the capacity to feel, think, and act in ways that enhance our ability to enjoy life and deal with the challenges we face. Thriving people have the potential to flourish. Thriving is usually associated with a positive sense of emotional and spiritual wellbeing and personal dignity.
- **Surviving:** when we are surviving, we are managing to continue to exist despite difficult circumstances. But we can build capacity with support, in areas that will make the most difference to us.

- **Struggling:** when we are struggling, people or things may be making it difficult to succeed despite our efforts. We associate struggling with longer-term, more complex situations. People who may, at some point, struggle are those most at risk of systemic inequity.

Different contexts require different approaches. Awareness of place, history, and circumstance will shape how we act.



**3.1 million** people in England feel lonely often or always

(Source: Community Life Survey 2023/24: Loneliness and support networks, published by the Government in Dec 2024)



01

## Mental health and loneliness

**Loneliness and mental health are deeply intertwined issues and can occur across the life course.**

Evidence exists that mental health and social connection can be supported through interaction with places and active participation with heritage.

- **Protective factors:** Actively participating in heritage promotes active, connected, and curious living – strengthening mental resilience and trust. Good design in places and cultural memory can support people and reduce isolation.
- **Response to community need:** Heritage supports mental wellbeing across diverse groups and settings. Individuals and groups facing high levels of loneliness can be supported better through heritage; participation can reduce isolation.

02

## Young people

**Disadvantage gaps emerge early and persist; they impact education and life satisfaction.**

Young people with mental health conditions are nearly five times more likely to be economically inactive compared to others.

Heritage can help young people thrive – through building resilience, creativity, and self-determination.

- **Protective factors:** Schools, Youth Justice, and social programmes can embed heritage to support wellbeing, while local spaces like parks, skateparks and community spaces are vital for enabling opportunities.
- **Response to need:** Tailored provision for young people, for example those facing disadvantage.

03

## Inequalities

**Healthy life expectancy is more than 18 years lower for the most deprived compared to the least deprived areas.**

Minoritised groups still experience the most significant disadvantage across multiple domains.

Meaningful heritage activities can create new opportunities and resources for people with lived experience of inequality.

- **Protective factors:** Embedding opportunities through heritage into existing systems can dismantle complex barriers caused by structural inequality.
- **Response to need:** Bespoke approaches can best support groups with shared experiences, whether through homelessness, living with disabilities or other forms of marginalisation.

04

## Community cohesion

**Trust in neighbourhoods has declined and 69% of respondents in a recent independent poll believe communities are more divided now than 10 years ago.**

Social capital, cultural expression, shared values and belonging are known and important connective factors to support healthy communities.

Heritage can support communities strengthen their connection to place and feelings of belonging – enabling people to tell their stories, build trust, and shape their environments.

- **Protective factors:** Involvement in heritage and planning decisions can build civic agency and pride of place.
- **Response to need:** Co-produced heritage projects can support community connection through inclusive narratives.



Dogtember 2025 at Saltdean Lido

Historic England protects and brings new life to the heritage that matters to us all, so it lives on and is loved for longer.

[historicengland.org.uk](https://www.historicengland.org.uk)

If you have any questions about the content of this document, please contact [linda.monckton@historicengland.org.uk](mailto:linda.monckton@historicengland.org.uk)

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