



THE INSTITUTE OF CONSERVATION

DCMS: Call for evidence on approach to Loneliness Strategy

Icon Response

18 July 2018

Icon, The Institute of Conservation, welcomes the opportunity to respond to the [DCMS's call for evidence on approach to Loneliness Strategy](#).

Icon is a membership organisation and charity which brings together those with a passion for the care of 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 and many others who share a commitment to improving understanding of and access to our cultural heritage.

Thinking about your experience with tackling loneliness, please tell us about any projects or initiatives you have found particularly effective and why you think this is.

Cultural heritage contributes to health and wellbeing and the conservation profession increasingly encourages community engagement and participation. This can be an effective tool in combatting loneliness, even if it is not the principal aim of the project or activity. Icon and its members have made the following observations:

1. Heritage projects can increase the health and wellbeing of groups of people often more vulnerable to isolation and loneliness.

One of Icon's members reported on the Tate's [Diggin the Gallery](#) initiative. The project invited young people with SEND to Tate Britain with their families and carers. The event aimed to include visitors who might be reluctant to visit an art gallery or might feel excluded because those in their care do not behave in a conventional way. The one-off event could be continued or used to inspire similar but longer-term projects to tackle loneliness amongst carers.

[Change Minds](#) was a partnership between the Restoration Trust, Norfolk Record Office and Together for Mental Wellbeing (and funded by HLF). The archival project was aimed at people from North Norfolk and Norwich who live with mental health conditions and are on low incomes, carers, volunteers and staff. The project engaged local people in the research of two digitised 19th Century Norfolk County Asylum Case Books at Norfolk Record Office and Norwich Millennium Library.

Radisson Court, Unit 2
219, Long Lane
London SE1 4PR

020 3142 6799
www.icon.org.uk

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2. Heritage sites and collections serve as focal points for the interaction of people and communities. The strong volunteering element of projects conserving and caring for heritage offers an opportunity for enhanced social engagement.

Icon's Conservation in the [Community Award](#) marks the valuable efforts and excellence achieved by volunteers on conservation projects. 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 deprived area of Birmingham. The project enabled volunteers from diverse backgrounds to develop meaningful relationships through working towards a common aim. Similarly, one of Icon's members who is working in a church near Southampton recently observed how once a week a number of parishioners and interested parties spend a day maintaining the church graveyard. He learned how those who participate do not necessarily participate because of their belief but because of the company. The projects show how the conservation of heritage can facilitate community engagement.

Volunteering projects in conservation often involve training and learning to ensure that the heritage asset is conserved and cared for with the appropriate skills. This learning has the added potential of empowering people. The Coffin Works team of volunteers were trained by a professional conservator. While the volunteers had no previous experience of conservation, the professional-led training and practical experience enabled them to quickly undertake preliminary conservation activities. The new skills and practical experience helped the volunteers to fill gaps in their knowledge and CVs, building their confidence.

3. Conservation improves infrastructure supportive of social relationships through preserving and making accessible historic buildings, sites and collections.

The Coffin Works conservation project allowed the Victorian factory building, which had been previously inaccessible through its semi-derelict state, to be opened up as a new heritage attraction. The project was successful in creating a centre that now offers a new space for events and interaction through which the community can stay connected and discourage isolation.

Thinking of any projects or initiatives that you feel have not been effective, why do you think this is and are there any ways you feel these could be improved?

The heritage sector employs foreign staff and students who can often be on short work placements (e.g. 6-12 months). This is a significant amount of time if you are lonely but not a long time for an organisation to respond to. Short term placements make it more challenging for people to develop friendships and build trust. This means that loneliness can even go unnoticed if the person suffering from it does not feel comfortable enough to raise it with colleagues. The effectiveness of organisational programmes to include people in activities both inside and outside of work depends on the person to engage with those activities.

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

Having access to best practice guidance for evaluation and assessment. It would be useful to have direction on how to measure impact when targeting loneliness is not the principal aim of the projects or activity.

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

Icon welcomes the plan for a cross-government strategy. We recommend a close relationship with the heritage sector in recognition of the contribution that heritage makes to tackling loneliness (as discussed in our first answer).