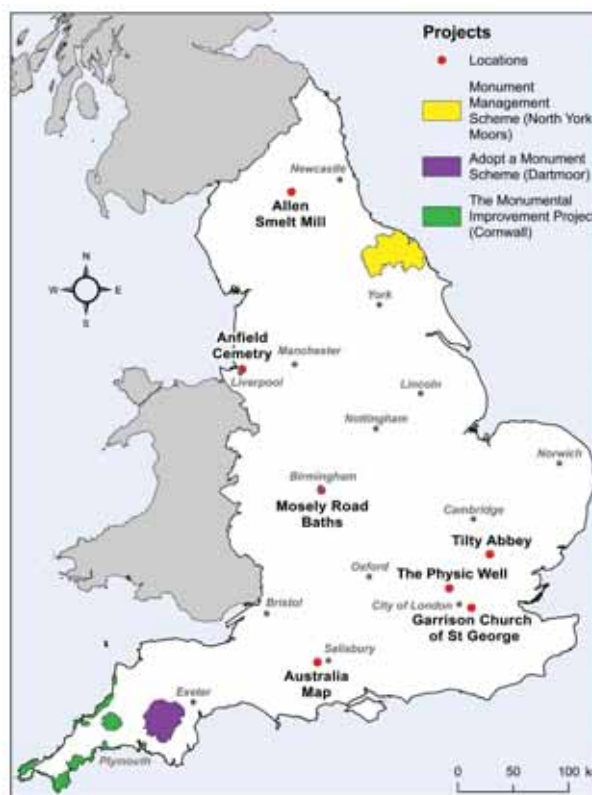


# Psychological wellbeing and heritage: new insights into the relationship between wellbeing and participation

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Poor psychological wellbeing is a widespread problem, causing anguish to millions and costing the UK £118 billion annually.<sup>1</sup> However, barely 10 per cent of NHS England's budget is spent on mental health.<sup>2</sup> In looking for effective strategies for supporting psychological wellbeing, research has shown the effectiveness of participation in social activities accessed either through formal 'social prescribing' or independently.<sup>3</sup> Some of this research has focused on activities relating to heritage (eg Reilly et al 2018; Heritage Alliance 2020, Sofaer et al 2021), but datasets remain small and mechanisms poorly understood, so the potential contribution of heritage to support wellbeing remains under-realised. Two recent research projects at the University of Lincoln aimed to help resolve this by exploring how and why heritage participation supports psychological wellbeing.



The location of the ten case study projects contributing volunteers to be interviewed for the HARAW project. Credit: University of Lincoln

In 2020–21 *Heritage at Risk and Wellbeing* (HARAW) aimed to identify and characterise wellbeing associated with volunteering on Heritage at Risk (HAR) initiatives. Importantly, HAR is *not* funded to support wellbeing but to mitigate threats to at-risk heritage assets; however, Historic England suspected positive wellbeing impacts on HAR volunteers (Gradinarova and Monckton 2019) and funded our research to explore this. We conducted one-to-one interviews with 35 volunteers on ten projects across England, generating 180,000 words of nuanced personal perceptions. The transcribed text was analysed word by word (by researchers in Health and Social Care, not Heritage) to identify expressions related to wellbeing, such as:

'every time I go back there, I still go wander and have a look at these boards and stare out them, still in sort of amazement, really, at, you know, how could this structure have been in this, what seems like a small field, you know, so no, it makes me feel happy that we did it and what came out of it'

(Lewis, Siriwardena, et al 2022, 48).

The context of each expression was coded using NVIVO software, and codes grouped into related categories to reveal themes; using this Grounded Theory methodology ensured that themes emerged independently of any preconceptions.

We elicited six overarching themes: purpose, being, capacity, sharing, self-nurture and actualisation (Lewis, Siriwardena, et al 2022). Firstly, volunteers felt positive about the sense of *purpose* they gained from HAR volunteering, which for many had special impact because they valued the past. Wellbeing in the *being* theme was associated with comments about identity, belonging and place attachment: rooted in history and

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/about-us/news/mental-health-problems-cost-uk-economy-least-gbp-118-billion-year-new-research>

<sup>2</sup> <https://fullfact.org/health/mental-health-spending-england/>

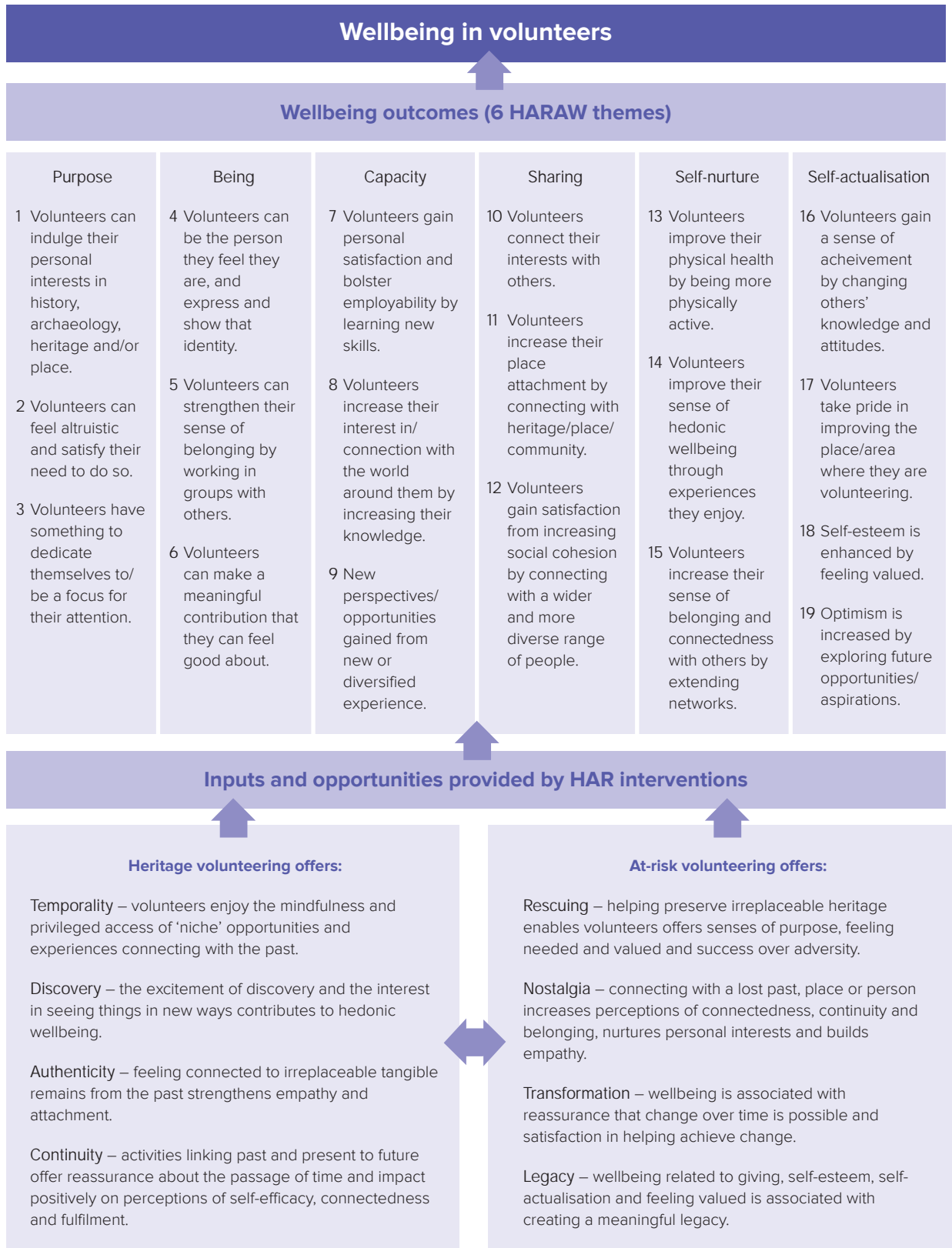
<sup>3</sup> <https://socialprescribingacademy.org.uk/about-us/what-is-social-prescribing/>

heritage; other forms of volunteering would not have offered the same wellbeing. In the third theme, *capacity*, volunteers felt positive about acquiring new skills, knowledge and experience, many of which (but not all) derived from the heritage context of the activity. Wellbeing was also associated with *sharing* activities and outcomes with

others and making overlooked, lost or hidden aspects of the past more accessible, visible or engaging to others. Wellbeing in the *self-nurture* theme was associated with the health impacts of increased physical or social activity. Finally, wellbeing associated with *actualisation* related to satisfaction in achieving goals and making a difference.

Analysing the different attributes of activities (eg, rural, indoor, mitigatory, publicly engaged) showed that although wellbeing was more frequently or strongly expressed in relation to rural, outdoor, physical activity that improved asset condition, all activities were associated with wellbeing in some way. Irrespective of the type of site or role being carried out,

*The six themes in the association between volunteering and psychological wellbeing elicited by Grounded Theory analysis of HARAW interview texts*



engaging with other people about the activity was notably frequently associated with wellbeing. This research enabled us to create a logic model and toolkits for supporting wellbeing during remedial

heritage activities (Lewis, Siriwardena, et al 2022, 107).

A different piece of research, *Community Archaeology in Rural Environments Meeting*

*Societal Challenges (CARE-MSoC)* has been funded by the European Union via four national research councils. It has involved more than a thousand residents of 15 rural communities in the UK, Netherlands, Czech

Inputs (what projects need)			Activities (what people do)		Outcomes (what people gain)					
Aims and motivations	Enabling actions	Resources needed	Opportunity	HAR-specific experience	HARAW wellbeing themes	NEF/NHS Wellbeing				
<p><b>From HAR team – all essential</b></p> <p>Identified need for heritage asset</p> <p>Assessment of required actions</p> <p>Product design</p> <p><b>From volunteers – all desirable</b></p> <p>Time</p> <p>Energy/enthusiasm /commitment</p> <p>Skills &amp; knowledge</p> <p>Networks</p> <p>Interest in history/ heritage</p> <p>Belief in value of history/heritage</p> <p>Desire to preserve heritage/ save from threat</p> <p>Aspiration to occupy time purposefully</p> <p>Attachment to site</p> <p>Attachment to place/community</p> <p>Desire to give to community</p> <p>Desire to connect with nature/ countryside</p> <p>Desire to use existing skills/ knowledge</p> <p>Desire to learn/ maintain physical/ mental capacity</p>	<p><b>Barriers to be removed</b></p> <p>Lack of resources</p> <p>Lack of information/ awareness of opportunities</p> <p>Too much responsibility on volunteers</p>	<p>Accessible asset with a heritage ‘story’ – can be any site type or condition (eg rural/ urban, building/ archaeological site, ruin/intact)</p> <p>Specialist advice and expertise</p> <p>Range of activities to match volunteer interests, aspirations and availability</p>	<p>Opportunities to connect with and learn from heritage/history/ archaeology/ place</p> <p>Opportunities to contribute and have a positive impact on asset/ place/people</p> <p>Opportunities for public/community engagement</p>	<p><b>Connecting with heritage aspects of project/asset, provides the opportunity and experience:</b></p> <p>Temporality</p> <p>Discovery</p> <p>Authenticity</p> <p>Continuity</p>	<p><b>Purpose</b></p> <p>Interest increased</p> <p>Altruism fulfilled</p> <p>Purpose found</p>	<p>Be mindful</p> <p>Give</p> <p>Learn</p> <p>Connect</p>				
					<p><b>Barriers to be managed</b></p> <p>Seasonality/ weather</p> <p>Health constraints</p> <p>Negative attitudes</p> <p>Site accessibility</p> <p>Poor communication</p> <p>Burdensome bureaucracy</p>	<p>Support/mentoring/ leadership</p> <p>Processes for communication/ providing feedback</p> <p>End-of-project support with reporting</p> <p>Support for scoping future activity (including ongoing volunteer activity and new project ideas)</p>	<p>Range of activity types (eg physically demanding and sedentary, heritage-specific and generic)</p> <p>Flexible management (activities are regular and/or as-needed, processes are managed and/or self-directed</p>	<p><b>Connecting with at-risk aspects of project/asset, provides the opportunity and experience:</b></p> <p>Rescuing</p> <p>Nostalgia</p> <p>Transformation</p> <p>Legacy</p>	<p><b>Being</b></p> <p>Identity expressed</p> <p>Belonging strengthened</p> <p>Contribution made</p>	<p>Be mindful</p> <p>Connect</p> <p>Give</p> <p>Learn</p>
									<p><b>Capacity</b></p> <p>Skills gained</p> <p>Knowledge expanded</p> <p>Experience diversified</p>	<p>Learn</p> <p>Connect</p> <p>Give</p>
									<p><b>Sharing</b></p> <p>Engagement achieved</p> <p>Connections made</p> <p>Inclusivity extended</p>	<p>Connect</p> <p>Give</p>
									<p><b>Self nurture</b></p> <p>Physical activity</p> <p>Psychological benefits</p> <p>Social benefits</p>	<p>Be mindful</p> <p>Connect</p> <p>Be active</p>
									<p><b>Self-actualisation</b></p> <p>Attitudes changed</p> <p>Placemaking supported</p> <p>Self-reflection undertaken</p> <p>Aspirations explored</p>	<p>Be mindful</p> <p>Give</p> <p>Learn</p> <p>Connect</p>

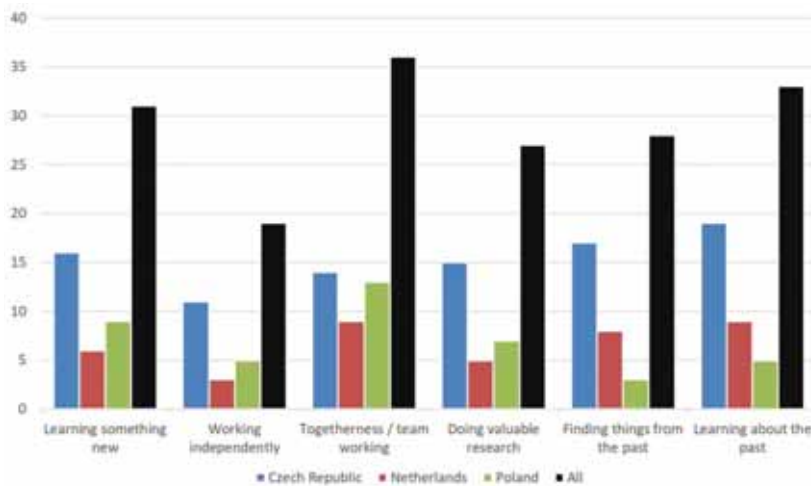
Concluding logic model showing the inputs and outcomes through which HAR volunteering is associated with wellbeing



(left) Rural residents carrying out CARE test pit excavations. Clockwise from top left: Vanovice (Czech Republic); Gemonde (Netherlands); Myslinka (Czech Republic); Woensel (Netherlands); Old Dalby (UK); Vanovice (Czech Republic); Chycina (Poland); Gemonde (Netherlands); Woensel (Netherlands) (centre). Credit: University of Lincoln

Republic and Poland in excavating archaeological test pits within their villages. Impact data has been captured from more than 400 participants using a variety of methods. Post-participation feedback data, for example (Lewis, van Londen, et al 2022), showed 89 per cent of all respondents rated the experience excellent or good, with learning something new, working with others and learning about the past overall the top-rated reasons for enjoyment in 2019. Participant comments showed all five recognised 'steps' to psychological wellbeing:<sup>4</sup>

- connecting with others (eg 'Good chance to talk and discuss things with other people' (CZ))
- being physically active (eg 'It was pretty intense in terms of physical exertion' (NL))
- learning something new (eg 'I enjoyed getting familiar with archaeological techniques' (PL))
- mindfulness (eg 'it was nice to just dig and think about nothing' (NL))
- giving back (eg 'it makes history, and thus the stories we learn and tell, a lot more tangible' (NL)).



(above) Aspects of the CARE-MSoC excavations particularly enjoyed by feedback respondents 2019–20 (n = 47), showing totals for each country plus overall totals in black. Credit: University of Lincoln

Emotion: 'I feel...'	Participant group change in responses before and after excavation	Control group change in responses before and after	Difference between participant and control groups
Passionate	+8	-2	+10
Hopeful	+3	-6	+9
Valued	+7	-1	+8
Energised	+5	-2	+7
Capable	+1	-3	+4
Happy	+2	-1	+3
Tired	+9	+10	-1
Curious	+2	+5	-3
Worried	-4	+1	-5
Depressed	-2	+5	-7
Bored	-4	+9	-13

We also used a new experimental survey developed with psychologists including questions relating to 32 different validated measures and 12 emotional affects, answered using a five-point Likert scale. The survey was completed before and after the excavations, by participants and by a control group of non-participants in the Netherlands and UK. Responses showed statistically significant changes in participant responses which were not seen in the control group and could therefore be directly attributed to participation. The

(left) Changes in emotional effects between pre-excavation and post-excavation responses, for participants and control group, ranked from greatest positive difference to greatest negative difference.

greatest affective impacts in (and differences between) participant and control groups ( $\geq 5$ ) were in participants feeling more passionate, hopeful, valued and energised, and less worried, depressed or bored. Analysis of the 32 other measures showed a significant increase amongst participants in perceptions of social support, community identification, group continuity, place attachment and life satisfaction (Brizi et al in prep).

Robust evidence is essential if policy makers and members of the public are to back the use of heritage activities to support psychological wellbeing. In Lincolnshire, for example, where around 14 per cent of people have a diagnosed mental health condition (Rhodes 2018, 4), 75 per cent of 1093 people surveyed in 2016 thought heritage *should* support wellbeing, but most were not clear *how* or *why* it could do this (Lewis et al 2019, 63–4). Wellbeing is now a strategic priority for

UK heritage organisations such as the National Heritage Lottery Fund, for whom increased wellbeing is a required outcome (<https://www.heritagefund.org.uk/publications/wellbeing-guidance>) and Historic England, whose wellbeing strategy was published in 2022 (<https://historicengland.org.uk/content/docs/about/strategy-wellbeing-heritage-2022-25/>). Our research should help both heritage and health sectors fulfil their wellbeing aims, as it shows not only *how* but also *why* participation in heritage activities supports psychological wellbeing.

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Carenza is an archaeologist and Professor of Public Understanding of Research at the University of Lincoln. Previously a senior investigator for RCHME, presenter on Channel 4's *Time Team* and founding director of Access Cambridge Archaeology at the University of Cambridge, her research interests include historic rural settlements, childhood in the past, public archaeology and the social benefits of heritage participation. She has led many public and community heritage

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.nhs.uk/mental-health/self-help/guides-tools-and-activities/five-steps-to-mental-wellbeing/>