

Executive Summary

Heritage Capital and Wellbeing: Examining the Relationship Between Heritage Density and Life Satisfaction

This research was funded by the DCMS Culture and Heritage Capital (CHC) Programme. The CHC Programme aims to develop a formal approach, using economic methodologies alongside quantitative and qualitative evidence, to ensure the economic, social and cultural values are assessed equally, and to create a robust evidence base for decision making. This research is one of a series of research projects Historic England is delivering as part of the CHC programme.

Research on the wellbeing benefits of heritage has typically focused on qualitative assessments of how active participation and engagement with heritage can lead to individual and communal wellbeing outcomes. In contrast, the current research offers a uniquely quantitative approach that robustly demonstrates that the very existence of cultural heritage in a place impacts residents' quality of life, above and beyond individual usage patterns. This research highlights the importance of conserving and protecting cultural heritage because of the wider benefits it provides to people, communities and society.

Within health and environmental psychology literature, environments are evidenced to be restorative, particularly those that are rich in fascinating features and that are perceived to be coherently ordered. Restorative environments stimulate positive psychological outcomes including reducing feelings of stress, anxiety, fatigue, and increasing feelings of safety, amongst others, in this way impacting long term health and wellness. We hypothesise that well maintained historic environments are good examples of restorative environments. Their unique qualities including their aesthetic character, architectural distinctiveness, beauty and authenticity contribute to the restorative qualities of historic environments. The existence of heritage assets combined with their public good nature implies that members of the public can benefit through both active and passive interactions with their historic environment.

The research employs a non-market methodology that explores the relationship between individual life satisfaction using data from the Understanding Society Survey, and levels of heritage density using data from the National List for England (NHLE). Heritage density is measured as the concentration of designated heritage assets within a 1km radius around a population-weighted centroid. Designated heritage is a proxy of the existing cultural heritage of a place. The final sample used in the analysis covers 25,111 individuals across 10,396 Lower Super Output Areas in England from 2017-2019. A cross-sectional regression model is used to examine the statistical relationship between life satisfaction and cultural heritage density. The relationship evidenced is between the existence of cultural heritage and life satisfaction, not between designation and life satisfaction.

The research findings show that there is a positive, statistically significant relationship between the density of heritage assets near one's residence and self-reported life satisfaction. A doubling of the density of heritage assets within a 1km radius is associated with a 0.025 rise in life satisfaction scores. This analysis robustly demonstrates that living in close proximity to historic assets holds a modest yet meaningful link to wellbeing.

Wellbeing and life satisfaction are multidimensional constructs, the model therefore necessarily considers and controls for other factors that influence life satisfaction including individual socioeconomic, demographics, health, and neighbourhood factors. This research shows that even when controlling for other factors, heritage has an important and significant role to play when considering holistic pathways to improving wellbeing outcomes.

To further explore the drivers of cultural heritage on life satisfaction, the research distinguishes between the different types of heritage including listed buildings (Grade I, Grade II* and Grade II buildings), scheduled monuments, protected wrecks, registered parks/gardens, battlefields and world heritage sites. The analysis demonstrates that it is the Grade II listed buildings that are the primary drivers of life satisfaction increases, though there was significance for Grade I and II* listed buildings. This suggests that it is the existence and abundance of local heritage, rather than the presence of rare, exceptional Grade I and II* heritage assets, that drive higher life satisfaction.

The findings of the research are monetised following the HM Treasury Green Book guidance on wellbeing using the WELLBY approach. A WELLBY or "Wellbeing-adjusted Life Year" is defined as a change in life satisfaction of 1 point on a scale of 0 to 10, affecting one person for one year. The analysis shows that a 1 unit increase in heritage density is associated with an increase in life satisfaction that is equivalent to £15.84. On average across England, individual life satisfaction gains from proximity to heritage are valued at approximately £515. This figure indicates the positive wellbeing value that living near cultural heritage assets provides. At the national level, the overall wellbeing value of residing in close proximity to heritage is estimated to be worth £29 billion per annum in England. These findings can also be disaggregated by Local Authority area and by Constituency to demonstrate the wellbeing benefits of access and proximity to local heritage.

Overall, this study highlights previously underexplored spill-over effects of place-based heritage and underscores the wider wellbeing benefits of place-based heritage beyond the market-based economic impacts. The findings show that living in close proximity to cultural heritage, particularly the more populous local, Grade II listed buildings, has a positive impact on life satisfaction. Heritage is an important part of place and the existence and retention of heritage is vital for good place making, providing environments where people can thrive. We conclude that policies that preserve and increase access to historic resources can serve as effective pathways to improving our national wellbeing, for both current and future generations.

Future research could develop these findings to consider causality; the unobservable characteristics of individuals and the environment; whether happier people so happen to choose to live in areas of higher cultural heritage; and the impact of alternative measures of cultural heritage e.g. local lists, Historic Environment Records or even age of buildings. Many of these avenues of research are being explored through the pioneering Culture and Heritage Capital Programme funded by the DCMS and Arts and Humanities Research Council.