Museums Matter
Health & well-being

There is growing evidence that social isolation is twice as bad for health as obesity or smoking fifteen cigarettes a day, and yet nearly two million people over 50 suffer from severe loneliness.[1] By working in partnership with specialist organisations such as charities, care providers and community groups, museums are able to devise specific programmes to draw people back into society and tackle loneliness and alienation. Protecting the vulnerable and addressing social exclusion is a requirement of central and local government, as is improving public health to provide an environment for people to be healthy and happy.

PUBLIC HEALTH

As people stay healthy through social connection, they reduce pressure on the health services. A museum building is a sociable place: somewhere warm and safe which appeals to people of all ages and backgrounds. The objects in museum collections, interpreted by skilled staff, stimulate memories, help people make sense of a confusing world, provide joy, and are the start for a conversation. These have been shown to positively affect mood, self worth and a general sense of well-being.[2] Local authorities, hospitals and social care agencies work with museums to reduce the need for more costly social interventions as they commission museums to deliver programmes. Objects can also make a message more relevant and memorable: Nottingham City Council used the John Players Collection at Nottingham Museums to demonstrate the dangers of smoking to young people.

MENTAL HEALTH

Supporting an aging and increasingly isolated population is a great concern for both local and national government. In England alone, 676,000 people have dementia; it is estimated that this number will double in the next 30 years and in 2012 the Prime Minister launched Challenge on Dementia 2020.[3] Handling objects which are familiar from their childhood can stimulate memories for those with dementia and prompt conversations with other people which may not otherwise be possible. Projects which provide access to museum collections for people with dementia (and their carers) – such as *House of Memories* at National Museums Liverpool or the activities run in the 1940s Orchard Cottage at Beamish

– are celebrated by public health professionals.

One in four people in the UK suffer from a mental health problem every year.[4] There is increasing public recognition of the importance of supporting those who suffer from poor mental health and to find ways to help alleviate it. Mental health services and public health bodies recognise the benefits of participation in the arts, culture and heritage; this is supported by research by the Royal Society for Public Health,[5] Canterbury Christ Church University and University College London.[6] The National Army Museum and the Royal Albert Memorial Museum run therapeutic projects for former service personnel. The *Capture It* project, delivered by Manchester Art Gallery and Wigan Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services, was based around creative workshops in the gallery inspired by the art works on display. It enhanced recovery and built self-esteem in young people with a history of self-harm and eating disorders.[7]

HAPPINESS

Participating in museums is associated with an increase in happiness equivalent to earning an extra £3000 a year and correlated with improved health and well-being.[8] A study of Scottish museums showed that 90% provided opportunities for volunteers, with benefits including increased employability for younger people and offering retired people a chance to stay active and maintain skills and knowledge.[9] 95% of participants in National Museums Northern Ireland's health and wellbeing programmes reported an enhanced quality of life and greater social interaction.

[1] http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/oct/14/age-of-loneliness-killing-us; http://www.campaigntoendloneliness.org/threat-to-health/; http://www.campaigntoendloneliness.org/references/

[2] *Arts, Health and Wellbeing Beyond the Millennium: How far have we come and where do we want to go*?, a report by the RSPH Working Group on Arts, Health and Wellbeing, June 2013, p.58

[3] http://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/SN07007/SN07007.pdf

[4] http://www.mind.org.uk/information-support/types-of-mental-health-problems/statistics-and-facts-about-mental-health/how-common-are-mental-health-problems/

[5] https://www.rsph.org.uk/en/policy-and-projects/areas-of-work/arts-and-health.cfm

[6] http://rsh.sagepub.com/content/133/1/66

[7] *Health + Culture: How museums and galleries can enhance health and well-being by Manchester Art Gallery,* Manchester Museum, Whitworth Art Gallery, Lime and Central Manchester University Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust.

[8] *Museums and happiness,* Daniel Fujiwara, 2013 http://www.happymuseumproject.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/04/Museums_and_happiness_DFujiwara_April2013.pdf

[9] Baird, L. & Greenaway, L. (2009). *Volunteering in museums. A research study into volunteering within museums* Museums Galleries Scotland