

# NUDGE THEORY

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**The quality of our historic environment ultimately depends on those who are responsible for its constituent components – the buildings, the spaces between the buildings and the landscape or townscape features. Key decisions affecting its qualities are largely controlled by individuals who live in the community, whether as homeowners, business owners or council members. While heritage professionals can help to raise standards through the projects they are involved in, they can achieve relatively little on their own without engaging with the public. Urban regeneration models have shown, time and again, that people power can be transformative if properly informed and inspired.**

Key avenues for engaging with the public include traditional media and marketing, social media and the internet. But often perfectly good messages are ignored. Timely maintenance, for example, makes complete sense, so persuading owners to clear out their gutters should be like pushing at an open door, but sometimes the door sticks. Maybe it is a question of the right nudge in the right place...

Among policymakers, interest in behavioural economics, social psychology and the use of concepts like ‘nudge theory’ has burgeoned since the 2008 economic crisis. This is partly due to reductions in public funding and hence a desire to explore new ways of doing more with less, but it also reflects a renewed political focus on non-regulatory approaches to interventions aimed at shaping civic behaviour in a range of public policy areas.

The publication of Richard Thaler and Cass Sunstein’s *Nudge: Improving*



*A Built Heritage at Risk Northern Ireland leaflet designed to ‘nudge’ building owners and managers towards routine maintenance and early intervention*

*Decisions about Health, Wealth and Happiness* in 2008 popularised nudging as a policy tool. In 2010 the UK coalition government established the Behavioural Insights Team (BIT), colloquially known as the ‘Nudge Unit’, within the Cabinet Office to apply the theory to public policy and services (see [www.behaviouralinsights.co.uk](http://www.behaviouralinsights.co.uk)). Backed by political leaders such as David Cameron and Barack Obama, similar initiatives have been undertaken in the US, mainland Europe and elsewhere, indicating widespread interest in innovative approaches to governance in a constrained financial climate.

Unsurprisingly for a theory that has gained so much political prominence in such a short space of time, the ideological underpinnings of nudge, the policy implications arising from its adoption, and the lessons from its application in practice are the subject of intense scrutiny, debate and scepticism. In the UK context, nudge has prompted reports by the House of Lords and the British Academy, while the wider academic and policy literature interrogates the theory from every conceivable angle.

A primary assumption of nudge is that people often do things that

are not in their own best interest, or delay doing things they need to until too late. Through the deployment of behavioural insights it is possible to shape human behaviour to meet identified public and other policy outcomes. Thaler and Sunstein define nudges as ‘any aspect of the choice architecture that alters people’s behaviour in a predictable way without forbidding any options or significantly changing their economic incentives’. The term ‘choice architecture’ refers to the design of the environments in which people make choices.

According to the 2011 House of Lords report *Behaviour Change*, choice architecture can relate to the provision of relevant and timely information, changes to the physical environment, changes to the default policy option, and the use of social norms through providing comparative information on what others are doing.

Two critical characteristics of nudges are that they are cheap to implement and are voluntary and non-coercive, with people ultimately remaining free to choose their course of action. Easily understood examples of nudges designed to have positive short and long-term health impacts include serving alcohol in smaller

glasses and making salad the default side order rather than chips.

The BIT and others have sought to test the theory through research on practical examples of nudges in a diverse range of thematic areas. For example, the introduction of ‘prompted choice’ for organ donation, whereby the driving licence renewal process cannot be completed without stating whether the applicant wishes to be a donor, is seen as providing a possible means of increasing opt-in rates. The choice of words was also found to be important, with a one-in-three improvement when readers were reminded that they too might need an organ transplant.

In the realm of charitable giving, in a trial targeted at encouraging investment bankers to donate a day’s salary, it was found that receiving a personalised email from a charity’s CEO, together with a packet of sweets, boosted the proportion of those giving from 5 per cent to 17 per cent.

With reference to behaviour change concerning policies related to the built environment, nudges have been applied to the promotion of walking and cycling and, more prominently, to encouraging energy efficiency and other measures aimed at tackling climate change. However, the BIT’s 2015 update report does not cite any examples which illustrate the application of nudge to the conservation of the historic environment. This is clearly problematic in trying to evaluate its relevance to conservation practice. It may also be indicative of the relative lack of prioritisation for the historic environment within government, and the inexperience of conservation bodies in the field of nudge theory.

Perhaps this should be of no great concern. There is a lack of clarity over what exactly constitutes a nudge and the ethics of what Adam Oliver calls its ‘libertarian paternalist’ philosophical roots and manipulative qualities seem questionable. Furthermore, criticisms of nudge theory such as those voiced by Tom Goodwin in the journal *Politics* (2012) dispute its ability to have a transformative impact on ‘the big problems that society faces’. Others argue that there is little evidence of its

supremacy and comparative advantage *vis-à-vis* other types of policy intervention, including its scalability from individual to large-scale trials, and its transferability between different experimental settings. Several proponents also share such concerns over its effectiveness. Writing in a 2013 edition of *Politics*, Chris Mills suggests that nudge cannot on its own effect long-term behavioural change in the absence of regulation and other options within a policy mix.

Indeed, far-reaching change ‘might require a push or a “shove” from government, rather than a mere nudge’, as Peter John and Liz Richardson argue. Thus, in relation to cycling and walking, policy interventions aimed at making these modes of travel more attractive than the principal alternative must be balanced with others rendering the use of the car harder and less acceptable if they are to have a significant impact. Because many aspects of the governance of the historic environment remain similarly dependent on conventional regulatory ‘carrots and sticks’ in what is frequently a resource-hungry and capital-intensive industry, nudge policies on their own might be limited in their overall impact.

It would be a mistake to discount the use of nudges outright, however, in spite of such criticisms. Learning opportunities are certainly available for those concerned with the management of the historic environment. Some of these are obviously cross-cutting, including the use of information technology; the redesign and/or reconfiguring of letters, forms and other written communications; the subtle use of prompts and signposting information; and, more critically, applying behavioural insights into thinking more deeply about how we communicate, while exploring different ways to engender a desired response from the target audience.

For non-governmental organisations, for example, the sustained focus of the BIT on giving and social action may provide lessons on improving fundraising in a difficult financial climate. Other examples might include brokering

‘neighbourhood agreements’ with local residents to increase participation in conservation area management, encouraging owners of historic buildings to avoid major repair bills by carrying out essential maintenance, and promoting the use of appropriate materials and skills. Nonetheless, these could be considered relatively ‘soft’ interventions compared to the daily activities of conservation officers, particularly in local authorities where enforcement and other planning functions are retained.

Indeed, quite apart from the lack of attention devoted to historic environment conservation in the nudge literature, evidence of successful behaviour change interventions at the local level is patchy and confined to a few innovator authorities. Of course, significant reductions in local authority conservation officer numbers over recent years arguably make such experimentation more difficult. This remains an obvious irony arising from the driving low-cost ethos behind theories such as nudge.

### Further Information

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House of Lords, *Behaviour Change*, The Stationery Office, London, 2011

P John and L Richardson, *Nudging Citizens Towards Localism?*, The British Academy, London, 2012

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A Oliver, ‘From Nudging to Budgeting: Using Behavioural Economics to Inform Public Sector Policy’, *Journal of Social Policy*, Vol 42(4), 2013

R Thaler and C Sunstein, *Nudge: Improving Decisions about Health, Wealth and Happiness*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 2008

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