



Council for  
British Archaeology



# **‘Trowel and Error’: A Public User Needs Survey for Archaeology**

**COUNCIL FOR BRITISH ARCHAEOLOGY  
MUSEUM OF LONDON ARCHAEOLOGY  
ISSN: 1754-8691**



**The Public User Needs Survey 2 (PUNS2) project was carried out from 2023 to 2025 by the Council for British Archaeology and MOLA.**

Funded by Historic England, Historic Environment Scotland, and Cadw, the project revisited the original 1999 PUNS survey on archaeological fieldwork publications, aiming to understand how the growth of digital practices, social media, and online platforms has impacted the accessibility of archaeological findings to the public. The findings highlight the importance of understanding audience needs and engagement preferences and the necessity of ongoing reflection on consultation strategies.

The findings emphasise the need for direct dialogue with audiences to provide meaningful recommendations and guidance. While digital engagement is crucial, in-person interactions remain highly valued.

The report's recommendations cover:

- Mitigating the negative consequences of a data-first culture in archaeology.
- Resolving issues around siloed and dispersed archaeological datasets.
- Increasing accessibility and inclusion for audiences.
- Approaching audiences and evaluating their experiences to understand the value of archaeology to wider society.

The full report can be found online at [www.archaeologyuk.org/our-work/puns2](http://www.archaeologyuk.org/our-work/puns2)

## BACKGROUND

The Public User Needs Survey 2 (PUNS2) project builds on the original 'Publication User Needs Survey' (PUNS) conducted by CBA 25 years ago. The original survey explored the usage and expectations of archaeological fieldwork publications within the UK archaeological community. The original survey highlighted dissatisfaction with the accessibility of archaeological reports within the community, but did not focus on accessibility to the wider public.

Given the expansion of the digital age and the establishment of platforms like the Archaeological Data Service (ADS) and OASIS, the PUNS2 project aims to bridge the gap between the two surveys by addressing how the digital landscape has impacted archaeological engagement.

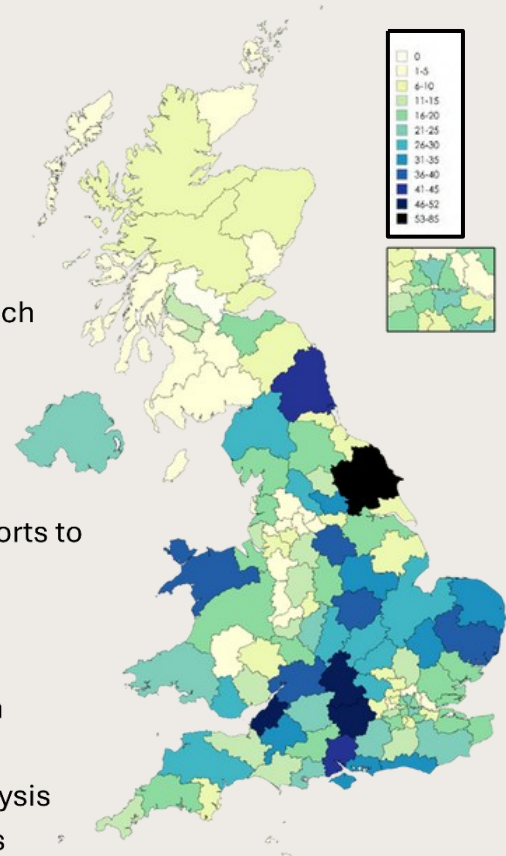
Our aims are to help the sector:

- Improve how archaeological information is shared with its audiences.
- Broaden the public value of archaeology by enriching understanding of audiences' uses and appreciation of archaeological outputs.
- Continue assessing the role of archaeological publications and their value in enhancing understanding of archaeological research across the UK.
- Recognise the importance of active listening and direct dialogue with audiences to provide meaningful recommendations and guidance.

## WHO TOOK PART

The PUNS2 project employed a mixed-methodological approach, incorporating literature reviews, surveys, workshops, and interviews, to gather extensive data on the engagement needs of archaeological audiences and the position of content producers. This comprehensive approach resulted in over 2,600 survey participants from both archaeological and non-archaeological backgrounds, 27 in-depth interviews with key practitioners, researchers, and volunteers, and 16 community workshops (8 in-person and 8 online) with 290 participants, including efforts to engage with underrepresented groups.

In total, the PUNS2 project gathered insights from 3,119 participants across the UK. The substantial amount of data collected has provided significant insights for the project's recommendations. There are opportunities for further analysis and comparison between different groups and geographies (England, Wales, Scotland, and English Regions), which may inform more localised approaches to similar surveys in the future.



## AUDIENCE SEGMENTS

The PUNS2 project identified three main audience segments as a conceptual framework for understanding the target audience groups of professionals, academics, voluntary groups, and the wider, non-specialist public. We used a variety of methods, including surveys, workshops, and interviews, to gather insights from each segment.

### Known to Archaeology:

This group encompasses individuals active in archaeology, including established members of the archaeological community, volunteers, professionals, as well as members of the CBA or other archaeological organisations, and students. They represent the wider public most likely to engage with archaeological outputs and events

### New to Archaeology:

This audience is generally supportive of archaeology and heritage, and is most likely to encounter archaeology through other heritage activities, such as visiting English Heritage or National Trust properties. They may also work in the wider heritage sector.

### Archaeology: Why Me?:

This audience may not immediately see the relevance of archaeology to them, and as such, their inclusion is critical for addressing matters of representation and shaping new perspectives on archaeology. This group may include individuals who work within the heritage sector but do not have a direct connection with archaeology (e.g. Human Resources and Administration)



The findings have led us to rethink the Archaeology: Why Me? segment, and instead consider that everyone has their own understanding of their personal relationship with the past, but they engage with many different interpretations of archaeology and heritage. This is often clear when addressing some of the more intangible aspects of heritage, such as personal relationships, customs and handicrafts.

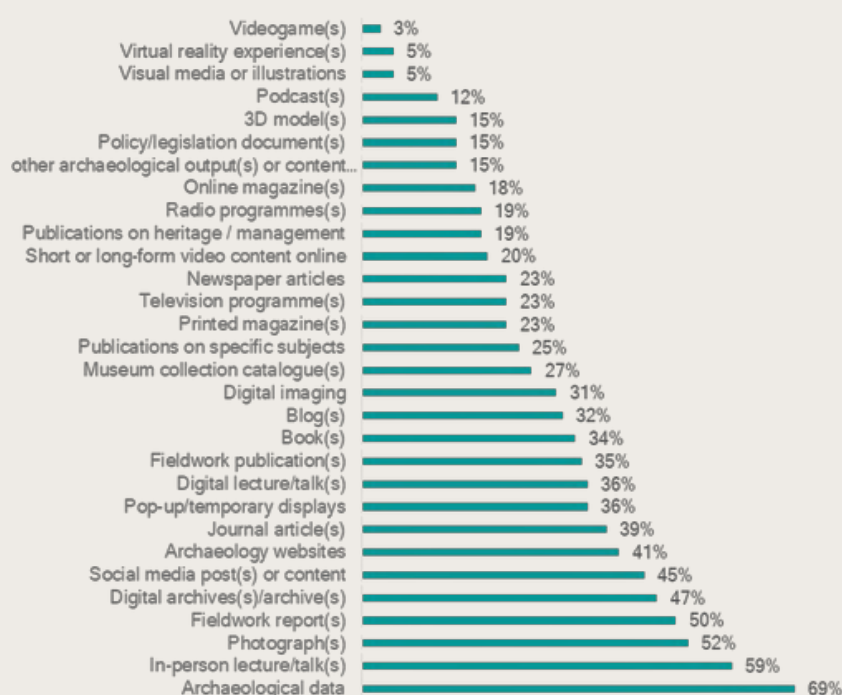
## DO YOU PRODUCE OR CONSUME?

37% of survey respondents considered themselves to be **‘producers’** of archaeological content (a further 20% said maybe) who contributed to content ranging from site data to social media, books to television programmes, policy documents to video games. Producers overwhelmingly agreed that the purpose of producing archaeological content is to inform the public and the historical record, with 99% agreeing or strongly agreeing. Informing the sector and clients are also important purposes, with 96% and 89% agreement, respectively.

Less than half of the producers (47%) target specific audiences (47%) target specific audiences for their content, with 16% uncertain about whether they do so. However, 86% of producers agree or strongly agree that they create content with a clear understanding of their target audiences. Additionally, 92% believe that their content is being used as intended.

Despite this confidence, only 58% report producing content with a clear purpose and intention. Furthermore, 59% of producers do not collect feedback or analytical data from the content they create and share. This lack of feedback collection was primarily attributed to having a limited budget and time.

Have you ever produced/created (or directly contributed to) any of the following archaeological content?



This raises the question: How can we be confident in reaching audiences and knowing that we are providing the public with what they want, without consistent evaluation?

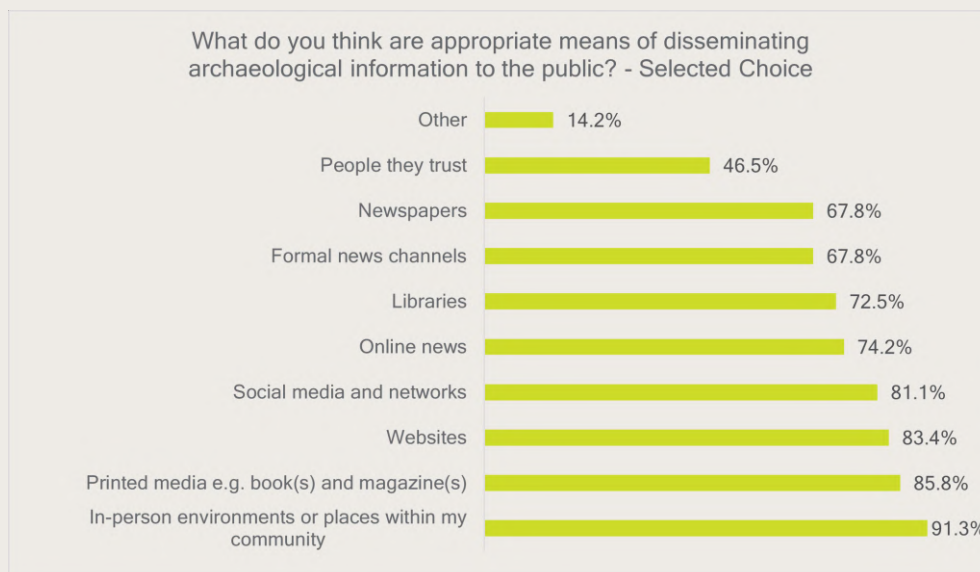
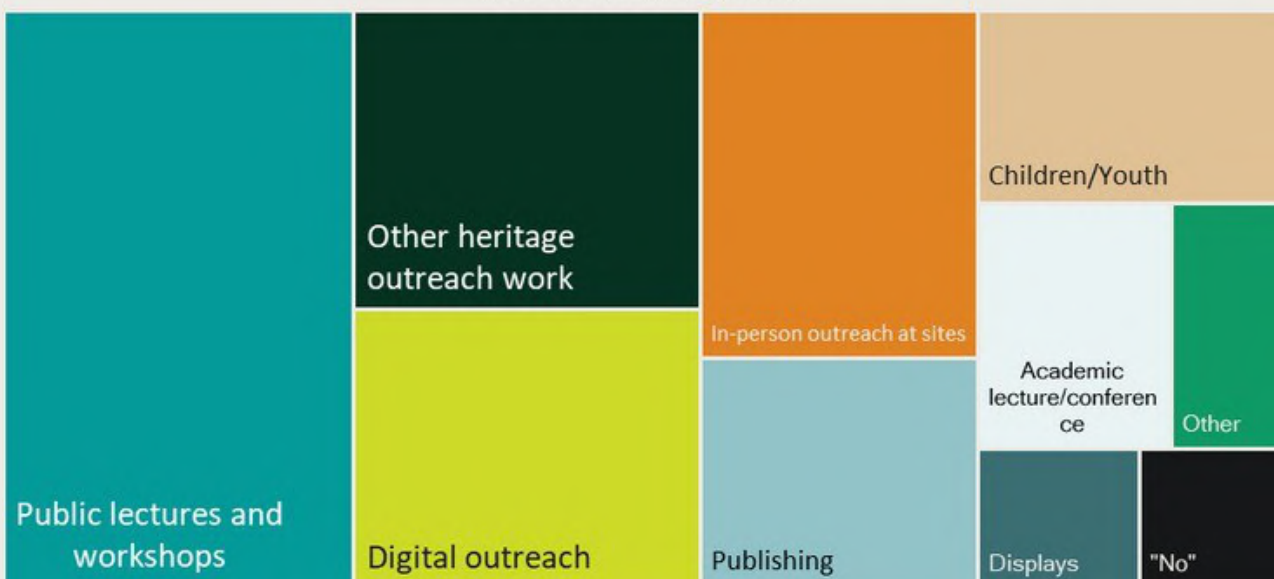


## POPULAR PRODUCTION

When producers were asked if they could provide an example of a time they felt successful in reaching or engaging their target audience, a significant number of examples involved direct interaction with an audience, such as doing site tours, lectures or outreach work.

One potential explanation for this could be that situations where feedback can be gathered instantly may feel more successful, particularly if producers lack the time or budget to run formal evaluations.

Can you provide an example of a time you have felt successful in reaching or engaging your target/desired audience?



**Respondents felt that the most appropriate means of dissemination was 'in-person environments or places within my community' at 91%, with printed media, websites, and social media following closely behind.**



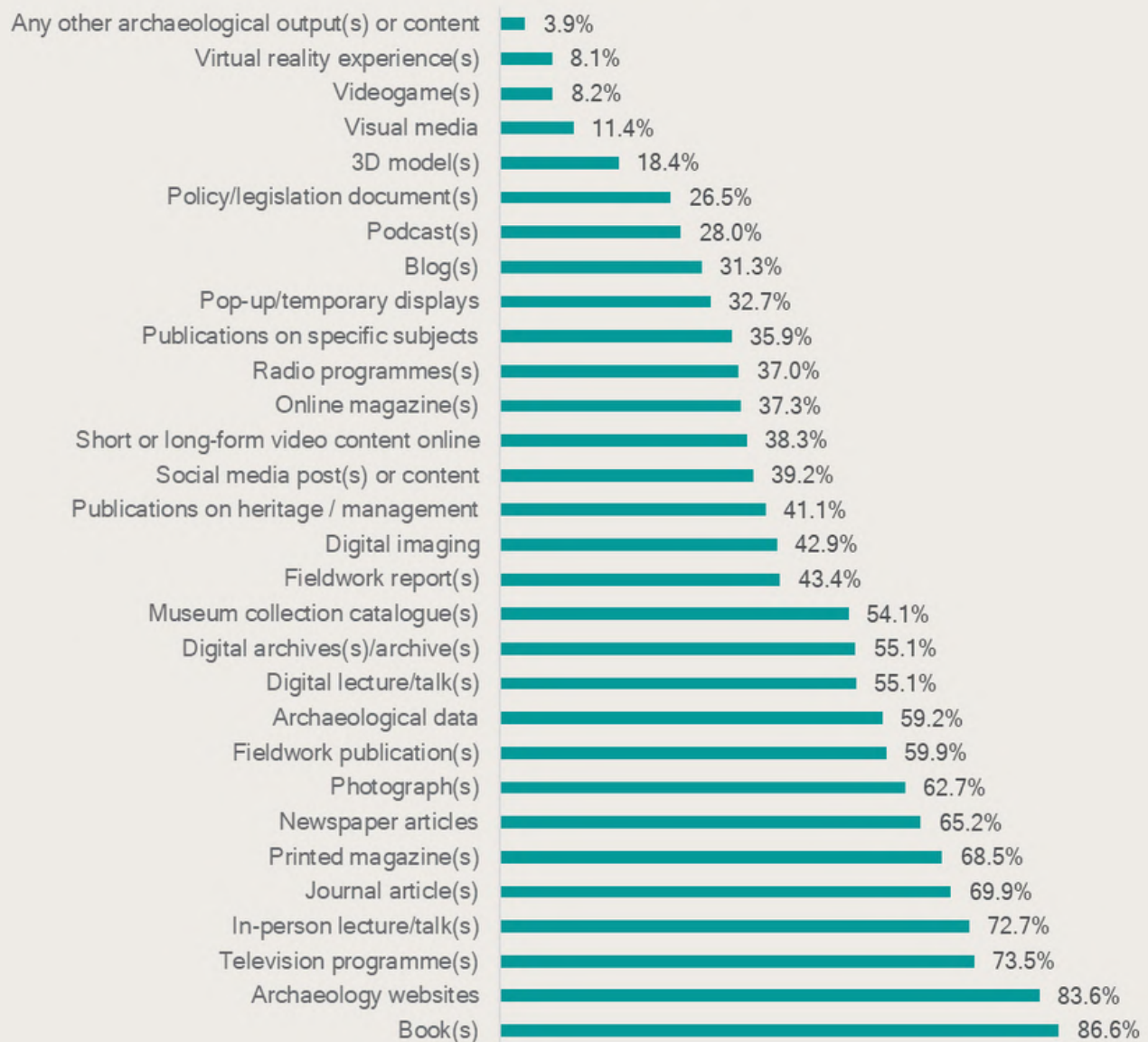
## CONSUMERS

Even if you produce archaeological content, you are likely also a **‘consumer’**. The survey results indicate that the most popular type of archaeological content used by respondents is books, with 87% of participants indicating they have used them. Archaeology websites follow closely behind at 84%.

Social media and video content are more popular among younger respondents, while older respondents (those 65 years of age or older) prefer magazines.

The content most used by respondents does not always align with what is most created by producers, with fieldwork reports and publications falling in the middle of what is most used.

Have you ever used any of the following types of content about, or involving, archaeology?





## HOW WE CONSUME

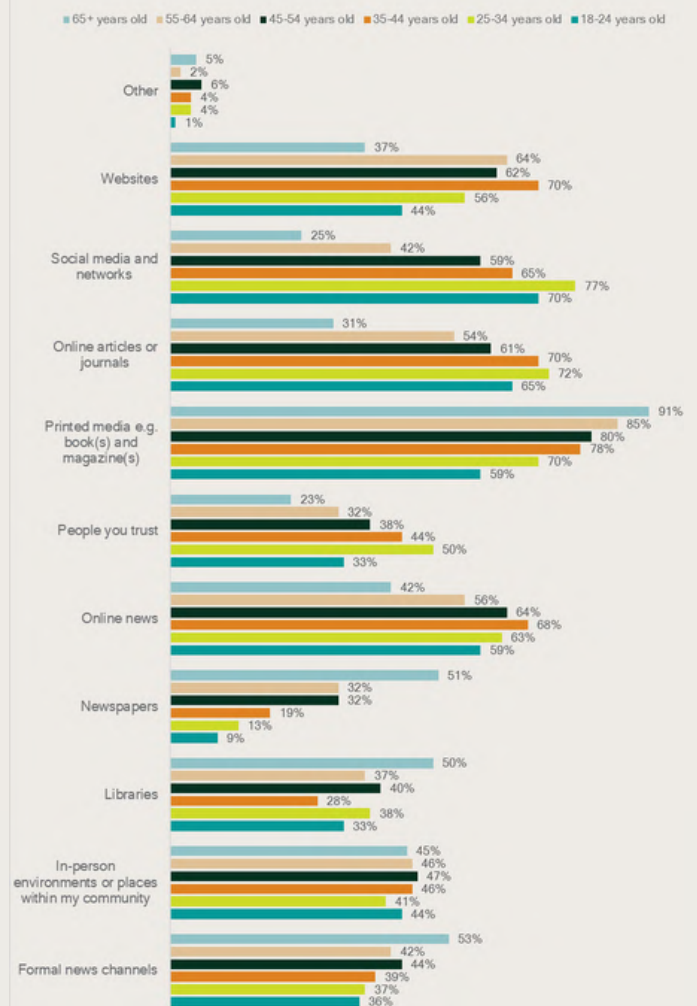
Preferences in types of content vary significantly by age group, with social media being more popular with younger respondents and listening and in-person interaction being more popular with respondents aged 35 – 44 years old.

YouTube stands out as the leading platform across all ages, and while Facebook is popular amongst older respondents, Instagram is the most popular for younger respondents.

Additionally, over 90% of all respondents said they trusted organisations or experts to provide them with credible and reliable sources of information.

**These insights can inform future strategies for engaging with diverse audiences and ensuring the accessibility and relevance of archaeological content.**

How old are you and How do you usually find content/information?

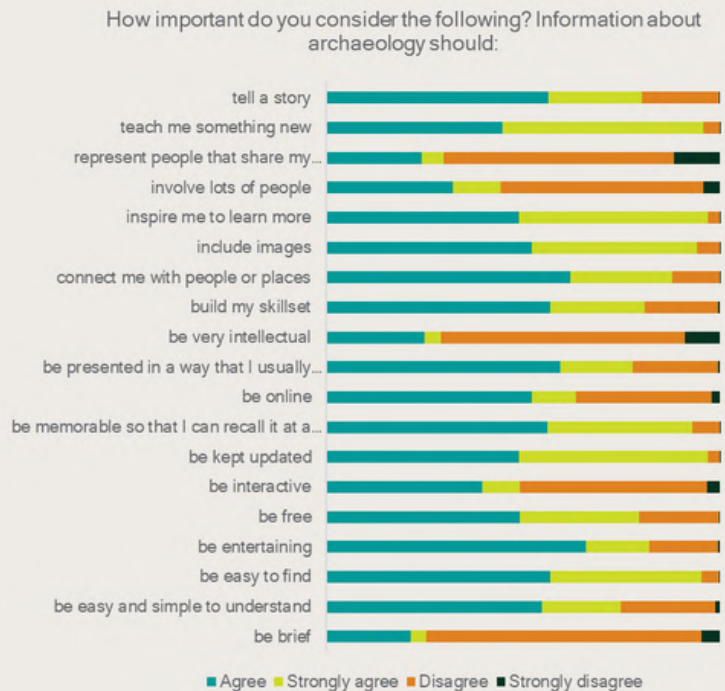




## WHAT WE CONSUME

The survey results indicate that people want to consume archaeological information that is accessible, in-depth and personal. Stories are important, as are connecting with people and places.

Respondents under 35 were more likely to agree that archaeological information should be 'free,' 'interactive,' 'kept updated,' 'build my skill set,' 'connect me with people or places,' and 'inspire me to learn more.' Older generations were more likely to disagree that archaeology should be 'presented in a way that I usually experience information.'



Further division can be found in the response as to whether they felt 'content and information about archaeology is targeted towards me' – 57% agreed/strongly agreed versus 45% who disagreed/strongly disagreed. This contradicts the producers' belief that they know who their audiences are (86%) and underscores the need for more audience research and understanding when developing content.

Sixty per cent of respondents reported encountering barriers to accessing archaeological information due to location or travel, and 46% cited financial barriers. Time is a much less significant barrier for 18 – 24 year olds, but it becomes increasingly significant for 25 – 34 year olds. Financial barriers were more of an issue for 35 – 44 year olds than for older respondents.



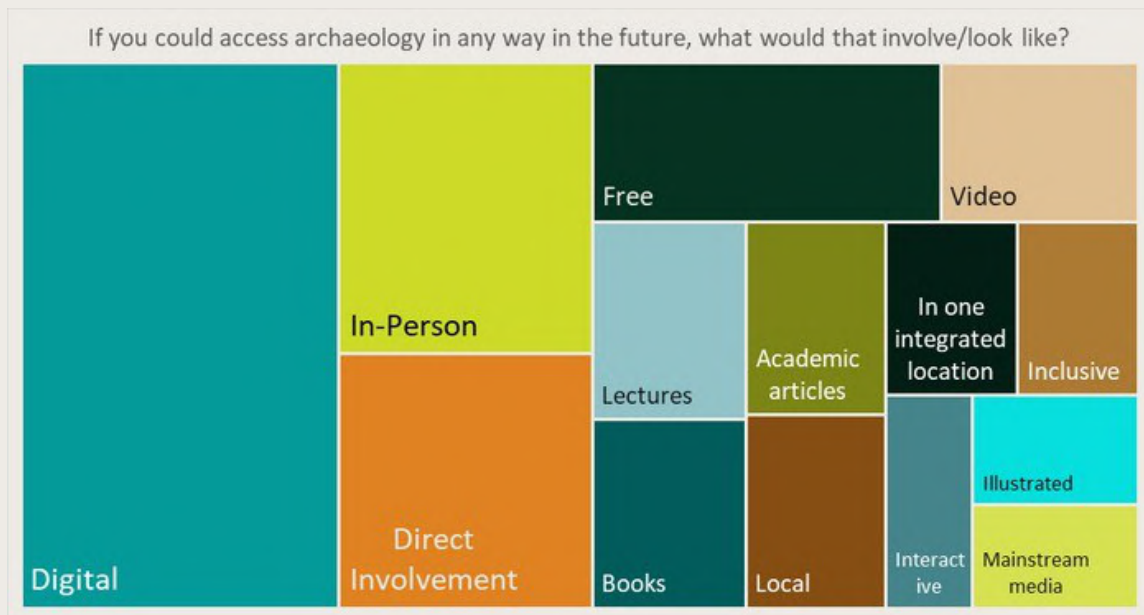


## FUTURE TRENDS

Producers should understand the preferences, interests, and needs of different groups and create content that resonates with them. This involves tailoring content to the audience's age, background, and interests, as highlighted by the varying preferences for content consumption among different age groups. Books and archaeology websites are the most popular types of content among respondents, with social media and video content being more popular among younger respondents, while older respondents favour printed magazines.

Utilising a combination of channels, including social media, websites, print media, and in-person events, will ensure a broad reach and engagement. Additionally, leveraging emerging technologies such as virtual reality (VR), augmented reality (AR), and interactive media can provide immersive and engaging experiences. Encouraging interaction through live Q&A sessions, webinars, and interactive social media posts can foster a sense of community and engagement.

Collecting feedback and analytical data from the content created and shared will help producers understand their audience better and improve future content. Staying updated with the latest communication trends and technologies is essential for enhancing communication efforts.



Looking to the future, most people want to access archaeological information digitally, then experientially, either through in-person events or direct participation. We also learned that 98% of our survey respondents agree / strongly agree that 'archaeology is useful'. Some of the reasons people gave as to why archaeology is useful included 'because it provides information about the past', 'allows us to learn from the past', 'brings people together' and 'creates a stronger connection to the past'.

## WORKSHOP HIGHLIGHTS

A total of 290 people participated in online or in-person workshops, which were targeted at the 'Archaeology - Why Me?' audience segment. The workshops consisted of activities, facilitated discussions, and creative outputs. Participants created collages from magazines and storyboards that reflected their interests and discussed how they would like to share these with others.

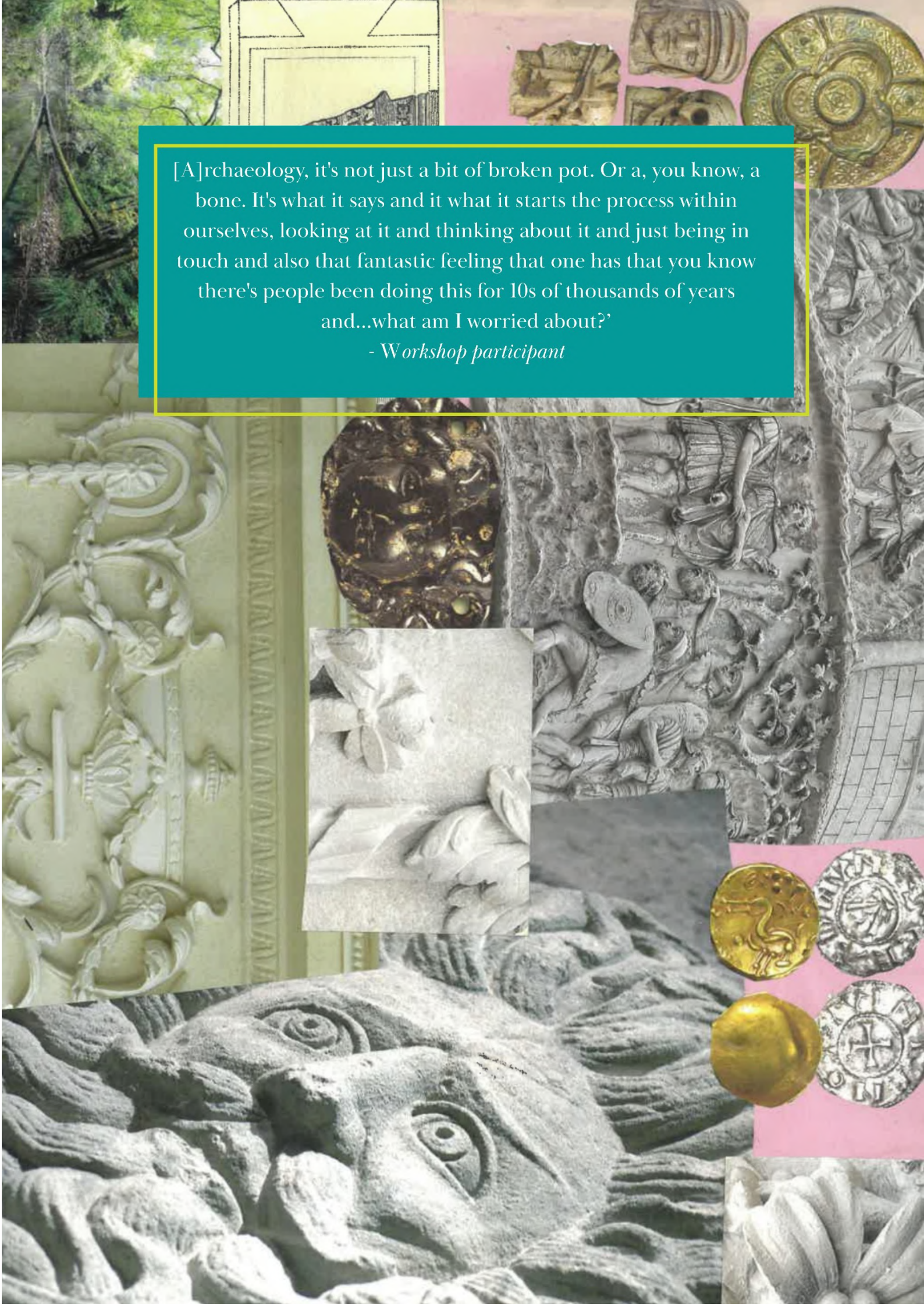
The workshops, especially the collages, were invaluable in providing insight into what interested the 'non-engaged' audience and into ways of sharing archaeological information:

- Participants did not shy away from hard conversations; there were discussions surrounding the ethics of digging, representation, repatriation, and the impact of wider politics on historical narratives.
- There is an emphasis on the importance of daily life: elites (i.e. rulers, monarchs, historical celebrities) were not mentioned often.
- There is a curiosity about how things are done, both the process of excavation, but particularly how people in the past did things.
- Local is important, but people often mention things far away and always did if their home country was not in the UK.
- Personal heritage is important for some groups, but not necessarily a focus for others.
- What future archaeologists would think of us now was an intriguing theme for participants, and sometimes wove in themes of sustainability and climate change.
- If participants undertook a craft or hobby themselves, this would always be reflected in their collages.
- Textual/numerical information, such as titles, facts, figures, and maps, was often included within the collages.
- Other key themes included human relationships with animals, landscape, burials, and religion.

Recruiting participants for the workshops was challenging and highlighted the need to build trust with facilitators, as well as the consideration of projects like PUNS2 to facilitate longer-term working relationships. However, the workshops themselves were highly successful, enjoyable for participants, and provided a great deal of insight into people's thoughts and preferences.







[A]rchaeology, it's not just a bit of broken pot. Or a, you know, a bone. It's what it says and it what it starts the process within ourselves, looking at it and thinking about it and just being in touch and also that fantastic feeling that one has that you know there's people been doing this for 10s of thousands of years and...what am I worried about?

- Workshop participant



## WHAT HAVE WE LEARNED?

### Conclusion One

**The dominant focus on the 'historical record' and 'data first' culture means archaeologists risk undervaluing and hiding ourselves, our practices, and the role we play in society.**

Our research has shown a clear desire for archaeology to shape people's understanding of the past and to highlight human-centred topics. There is a concern that data collection is prioritised to the detriment of interpretation, resulting in fewer opportunities to connect with audiences.

In addition, divorcing the human element from archaeological methods disconnects the pursuit and understanding of archaeology from audiences, which can exacerbate misinformation and shrink the relevance and value of the profession.

### Conclusion Two

**Archaeological data is siloed and dispersed.**

The survey showed that consumers seek information that is up-to-date, readily available online, and easily accessible. Dependent on age, people also consult websites to find information. However, the interviews highlighted a need in the sector to come together to share work and insights, and to use this to produce more creative outputs, ideally across interdisciplinary fields.

Open-access databases and articles are ideal, but they should be further developed to enhance accessibility and inclusivity for diverse audiences.

Lack of access to data, accessibility issues, and the disparate nature of data can exclude audiences, but there are opportunities to work collaboratively and creatively.

### Conclusion Three:

**The Traditional View of Archaeology is Still Loaded with Elitism, Leading to Exclusion**

The PUNS2 project has revealed that the traditional view of archaeology is still perceived as elitist, leading to the exclusion of diverse audiences.

The literature review and interviews highlighted concerns that archaeological data and outputs are often inaccessible due to the use of technical jargon and a lack of inclusivity. This perception of elitism can disconnect audiences from the benefits of archaeology and limit the profession's relevance and value. While media preferences changed with age, a surprising finding was that books, magazines, and printed media were the most frequent way certain respondents discovered information (84%), with 43% utilising libraries. YouTube was shown to be the most ubiquitous social media platform — used by audiences of all ages - although trends can change. Essentially, media decisions must be considered in conjunction with accessibility and inclusivity.



Workshops demonstrated that participants are eager to engage with nuanced and ethically complex topics, suggesting that audiences are capable of understanding and valuing detailed archaeological discussions.

## Conclusion Four:

### **Audience selection, feedback and evaluation are lacking in the sector.**

Conclusion Four highlights a lack of understanding around audience selection and insufficient tracking of feedback and evaluation in archaeological practices.

While producers are generally confident about their intended audiences, interviews reveal concerns about working with familiar groups to meet engagement targets, influenced by clients' desires for higher engagement numbers.

Both the survey and interviews emphasise the need for effective audience research (Audience Mapping) and accessible evaluation methods. The survey shows that different age groups respond differently, underscoring the impact of audience type on engagement.

The lack of resources and capacity to evaluate archaeological outputs effectively is a significant concern, potentially leading to the exclusion of diverse audience groups and undermining efforts to demonstrate the public benefit of archaeology.



## PUTTING PUNS2 INTO PRACTICE

What we have learned from the PUNS2 project is that people are interested in what we, the archaeological sector, are doing, especially in terms of how and why. The process of discovery is as important as our insight into findings when seen as part of a broader dialogue.

We have compiled the top recommendations for those creating and/or disseminating archaeological content to maximise reach into different audiences.

## REACHING THE ‘NEW TO ARCHAEOLOGY’ AND ‘ARCHAEOLOGY: WHY ME?’ SEGMENTS

The recommendations for connecting with these audience groups centre around making archaeology more accessible, inclusive, engaging, and nuanced.

- Any archaeological output should **include reflections about the archaeological process**, how it felt, and what wider conclusions might be relevant to the audience.
- **Provide short summaries** at the beginning of grey literature reports aimed at local press (different from the technical summary that currently occurs), using layman's language to outline what was found, what it means, and where to find more information.
- **Promote ‘tours’ of free and open-access digital platforms** where available and offer guidance on their use, and if possible, provide training sessions for the public to ‘dig into’ specific archived archaeological data.
- **Develop YouTube content or vlogs** teaching people how to delve into raw archaeological data.
- **Enhance existing knowledge platforms (like Wikipedia)** and link back to raw archaeological data.
- **Make full use of co-design approaches** in archaeological engagement projects to fully include diverse voices and optimise archaeological dialogues.
- **Layer information in outputs** from brief to deep to enable a range of understanding and broaden the intellectual accessibility of archaeological content.
- **Offer outputs in different languages** and ensure visuals can be easily interpreted by non-English speakers, and alternative text is provided for screen readers.
- **Use a range of media to reach audiences**, including books, in-person lectures, and social media.
- **Know your audience** through audience mapping research. This may include creating output and social media policies and strategies with clear project aims, following the Theory of Change methodology, and setting project KPIs to ensure you are meeting your audiences and objectives.
- **Offer in-person outputs and digital content** that are interactive and invite immediate audience feedback.



- **Surveys and all methods of evaluation must be considered in terms of their accessibility** – it is possible to co-design evaluation methods with audiences to ensure optimal accessibility and inclusion.

## CONNECTING WITH THE KNOWN TO ARCHAEOLOGY SEGMENT

**To better reach this segment, which both consumes and produces archaeological content, recommendations focus on enhancing internal professional development and fostering a more inclusive and collaborative environment.**

- Engagement practitioners should **seek opportunities to share their knowledge internally**, for example, by involving field archaeologists in engagement work.
- **Formal training is needed** on how to ethically and appropriately translate data into interpretations for different audiences.
- Explore the possibility of **including interpretations, creative outputs, and reflections alongside raw data** in archaeological archives, drawing lessons from the museum sector and other projects.
- **Establish Codes of Conduct to create respected spaces for engagement** and develop meaningful support systems (e.g. Mental Health First Aiders) to mitigate burnout from public engagement, especially when dealing with extreme views.
- **Increase opportunities for diverse audiences** to get involved with archaeology and consider it as a useful career step via internships, placements, and training. This could include a focus on a range of transferable skills, including social media experience (potentially to reach new audiences).
- **Tackle assumptions about how different ‘fields’ of archaeology perceive each other’s work**, generating more understanding of how archaeology works as a series of practices. Engagement practices should be considered equally as specialist techniques within this bigger picture.
- **Gather ideas (in an ‘Ideas Bank’)** generated from the users and audiences – realising these ideas can heighten relevance for audiences.

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR COMMISSIONERS

**When working for commissioners (funders and clients), the recommendations emphasise fostering audience-centric approaches and supporting data accessibility to maximise public benefit. If the expansion and deeper understanding of our audiences occurs hand in hand with our commissioners, then it’s a shared journey and increases the significance of archaeology.**

- **Advocate for public benefit and access.** The archaeological sector needs to collectively champion the public benefit of archaeology, specifically including access to the archaeological process itself. Commercial clients should be encouraged to facilitate this, for example, through site visits or accessible archiving.
- **Prioritise funding for integrated data.** Commissioners should allocate specific funding for projects that focus on making archaeological data more accessible, integrated, and user-friendly for diverse audiences, including funding for training, platform development, and long-term maintenance.
- **Incentivise collaboration** by encouraging proposals that demonstrate partnerships between archaeological organisations and other sectors (e.g. tech, arts, education) to create innovative and accessible outputs.
- Commissioners should acknowledge that a small number of highly engaged new participants can be more valuable than large numbers of already interested individuals, **shifting focus from pure quantity to quality of engagement.**
- **Support co-design** and outputs that integrate creative practitioners and diverse perspectives.
- Commissioners should be presented with the benefits of fully understanding our audiences' needs towards increased public benefit, especially early in a project lifecycle.
- Work with commissioners to **develop clear aims for audience-centred work** (e.g. using Theory of Change methods) and leverage their own expertise, guidance, and resources on working with audiences. There is potential for utilising community-driven outputs in clients' own communications and brand-building efforts.
- **Create clear and comprehensive evaluation reports** aimed at commissioners, demonstrating how project objectives were met, showing how evaluation insights feed into public benefit aims (e.g. via social value indicators), and constructively presenting any project failings as learning opportunities.
- **Simultaneously evaluate** for both client and internal project aims, to enable lessons to be taken forward.

## THE ROLE OF ADVOCATES

**Advocates champion archaeology and the archaeological sector, including membership organisations, lobbying groups, and statutory consultees. The recommendations for Advocates emphasise promoting accessibility, co-design, and ethical engagement within the sector:**

- **Promote inclusive and accessible archaeology** by championing accessibility, sharing successful case studies, and sharing knowledge and skills across the sector. Promote and facilitate co-design initiatives, especially with underserved or excluded groups.



- **Enhance archaeology's societal relevance** by supporting the development of resources for archaeologists and archaeology to engage with pressing social, ecological, and economic issues.
- **Build sector capacity through collaboration**, and incorporate public benefit into strategies that empower archaeologists as 'visible leaders.' Foster cross-sector partnerships, particularly for archaeological archival methods.
- **Address workforce well-being** and the impact of engagement work on the workforce, which includes being aware of political interpretations of archaeology. Develop guidelines and toolkits for staff safeguarding and well-being in public engagement.
- **Improve evaluation and data-driven practices** by campaigning for shared platforms for audience mapping and evaluation, including redefining success. Work to shift commissioner perspectives beyond 'bums on seats' metrics to understanding the value of quality engagement.
- **Initiate discussions on interdisciplinary collaboration** for audience mapping and evaluation frameworks.







## THANKS TO YOU...

The PUNS2 Project could not have been conducted without the support of the project sponsors: Historic England, Historic Environment Scotland and Cadw. The project team benefited enormously from the advice and contributions from our Critical Friends' Group and colleagues within the archaeological and historic environment sector. EDI advice was provided by Cheryl Garvey at Talk Listen Create, and Anna Cullum Associates undertook the project evaluation. The PUNS2 team consisted of Leah Hewardine and Liberty Hinze (Project Researchers) and Kate Faccia and Katrina Foxton (Project Experts).

Most importantly, we greatly appreciate the time and thought given by everyone who completed the public survey and stopped to talk at events, conferences and libraries. Thanks as well to those who kindly gave their time for interviews and sharing their perspectives.

We are particularly grateful to - and continue to be inspired by - the many community group we met along the way:

- Crannog Centre
- CAER Heritage
- Uncovering Roman Carlisle
- Barking & Dagenham Young Carers
- Glasgow Disability Alliance
- Leith Public Library
- Thurrock ESOL Learners
- AAWAZ
- EYES 4 POSITIVITY
- Scotinform
- Kurdish Women Community Group and the Kurdish Youth Community Group

**Want to know more? The full PUNS2 Report is available on the CBA website [www.archaeologyuk.org/our-work/puns2](http://www.archaeologyuk.org/our-work/puns2)**

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