

Arran Johnson, York Archaeology, shares details of an innovative social prescribing project that was built in partnership with City of York Council and the York Centre for Voluntary Service

Archaeology on Prescription

There is nothing quite like archaeology. It takes you to new and exciting places filled with the promise of discovery and spaces shared across time.

Over 18 years as an archaeologist, I have often found myself totally immersed in my work. In these moments, a combination of delicate technique and unfolding mystery fires the imagination, and challenges the mind to consider how, when and even why the feature you are working on came to be. In essence, this is mindfulness.

In 2021, I was given the opportunity to co-design and deliver a brand new programme that would use archaeological practice to have a positive impact on the well-being of participants.

The aim was to capture that sense of wonder and make it accessible to audiences that may not have experienced archaeology, or perhaps believed that they would never be able to.

The result was Archaeology on Prescription, an innovative social prescribing project built in partnership with City of York Council and the York Centre for Voluntary Service. Funded primarily by the National Lottery Heritage Fund, alongside a range of other sources, the project has now engaged 134 people and is about to begin its third season.

The project is an excellent example of the merits of partnerships and cross-sector knowledge exchange.

It benefitted greatly from early discussions with sector colleagues at a number of organisations, including Wessex Archaeology, the National Academy for Social Prescribing, Historic England, Converge, and the NHS.

The York Archaeology Community Engagement team remains committed to this collaborative spirit, sitting on numerous panels and working groups, and regularly sharing our experiences at conferences and events.

It is vital for heritage practitioners working in the well-being sphere to share ideas and innovations and to come together to discuss challenges.



So, how does it work?

Archaeology is a communal activity by nature, requiring teamwork and camaraderie. The pioneering Operation Nightingale has shown how archaeology can engage and inspire people recovering from injuries sustained during military service, while the Restoration Trust's Human Henge project has had great success in using the historic landscape as a catalyst for creativity and healing.

Archaeology on Prescription combines professional quality archaeological practice with a generous amount of flexibility. Participants are encouraged to decide their own experience, with complete freedom to choose, and switch between, the activities they engage with.

I have used my experience of managing the York Archaeology training excavations to create a modular learning system, with each element becoming an enjoyable bitesize activity.

I am a huge fan of 'accidental learning' and participant feedback has shown that people have surprised themselves with how rapidly they have picked up new skills and, by extension, confidence and self-esteem. Many participants have commented on being able to take part in activities that they hadn't thought they would be physically able to.

This, to me, is all down to the



thoughtfully created atmosphere that the project offers. Extensive staff training and a range of measures aimed at making the site and activities accessible create an environment in which participants feel supported, safe, and at ease.

I cannot praise our delivery team highly enough for their ability to make people feel comfortable and empowered to communicate their needs, and to co-create arrangements that best suit them.

Providing structure

Participants are enrolled via NHS referral by a social prescriber or link worker, or through one of our numerous partner organisations, such as Changing

Lives, The Hut, and The Blueberry Academy. As many of our participants experience some level of social anxiety, social mixing is carefully staged.

Participants have the opportunity to meet the delivery team and chat about the project from home via a virtual meeting. In-person involvement begins with a friendly and informal on-site taster session with limited numbers.

Participants then choose to sign up for two on-site blocks of seven weeks. Every session begins with a cuppa, a chat, and an impressive selection of biscuits. Enrolment, safeguarding, and evaluation processes are thorough, but structured, to be as unobtrusive as possible.

Participants choose from a wide range of activities covering the whole spectrum of urban field archaeology, alongside historic research, creative responses, and scrapbooking.

All activities take place within a small area to ensure that no-one feels isolated, though designated quiet spaces are also available. The finds table is the social hub of the site; when interesting objects are discovered, they can be immediately cleaned and discussed.

Each task contributes to the shared goals of the project, cementing social bonds between the team. In fact, feeling part of a team and contributing towards meaningful research is a common theme in participant feedback.

Interpretation is a communal effort, and some of the ideas that have arisen



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from group discussions have been inspired; such is the joy of bringing together people with different backgrounds and perspectives.

The end of autumn sees a transition from site work to the 15-week Winter Programme during which participants elect to join one or both of two available programmes.

AO People's Museum uses historic crafts and storytelling exercises as a basis for the creation of self-curated box museums that reflect on individual experiences and takeaways from the project.

Post-excavation sessions allow participants to take part in archive processing and analyses, and preparation of the assessment report. Each session features a 'tangent' in which free-to-use resources are introduced, both online and at the Explore York Archives.

Both elements of the Winter Programme aim to equip participants with skills that can be used beyond the end of their time with Archaeology on Prescription.

The sessions are lively and accessible and I have seen loose social connections become genuine friendships. The programme culminates in a public exhibition of the box museums and key finds of the season's excavation,

as well as a celebration event for graduating participants.

Graduates then have the opportunity to sign up to a monthly newsletter detailing voluntary opportunities with York Archaeology and beyond. Funding is also set aside for participants to attend the public training excavation and further hone their new skills.

Archaeology on Prescription has been an all-consuming part of my life. It has been inspiring, exhausting, rewarding, and humbling. Experience gained from the project has led to greater investment in the support and welfare of the delivery team and many new accessibility measures.

When I found out that I had been awarded the prestigious MARSH Community Archaeologist of the Year award, it was an incredible moment. It reminded me to stop and reflect on what my work has achieved. With the help of my incredible colleagues, I have seen a wonderful idea mature into a transformative programme that has genuinely changed lives.

Finally, I must pay tribute to each and every one of our participants. This project would be nothing without them, and I'm proud to say that graduates are now helping us to shape the project's future. There is nothing quite like archaeology. ■