

Preliminary Report

"Wellbeing and Archaeology: Can Focusing on Social Value Have Benefits for Archaeologists Too?"

Presented at the Chartered Institute for Archaeologists (ClfA) Annual Conference 2025
by Ellen Durbin and Heloise Meziani on behalf of the Diggers' Forum

1. Introduction

The survey was designed in response to a question asked by Sarah May at the 2024 EAA Conference: *"if heritage is good for wellbeing, why are professionals so miserable?"*. It prompted the 2025 ClfA conference session entitled *"Wellbeing-focused engagement in archaeology: how and why do it and what it means for us?"*. The Diggers' Forum wanted to understand if professionals are really miserable, and if so, what can be done to improve wellbeing.

The results in this preliminary report were first shared at the Annual ClfA Conference 2025. Recognising that not all members of our community could attend the session, we wanted to make our findings accessible more widely, particularly to those working in the field, whose perspectives shaped this work.

As part of the session *"Wellbeing-focused engagement in archaeology"* the results of this survey were delivered by the Diggers' Forum (DF), a ClfA Special Interest Group established in 2004 to represent field archaeologists, the practitioners working in all weather conditions, across all kinds of landscapes, making archaeology happen every day.

The session explored how the concept of social value, typically applied to public engagement and community benefit, might also be turned inward to improve wellbeing and working conditions for archaeologists themselves. We asked under the title *"Beyond the Spoilhead: Unearthing the Value of Field Archaeologists"*: what would it mean to value our work not just in terms of what it gives to others, but in how it sustains those who do it? The Diggers' Forum shared key findings, highlighted our concerns, aspirations and potential benefits for those on the ground.

2. Background and Aims

Working in UK commercial archaeology is challenging. Many of us are familiar with the realities: prolonged travel, physically demanding work, and limited recognition or support. These pressures contribute to high attrition, mental and physical strain, and a persistent sense of undervaluation.

The Diggers' Forum has long advocated for fairer, more sustainable field careers. This project was grounded in the belief that wellbeing in archaeology should be more than a personal burden, it should be recognised as a structural responsibility of the profession.

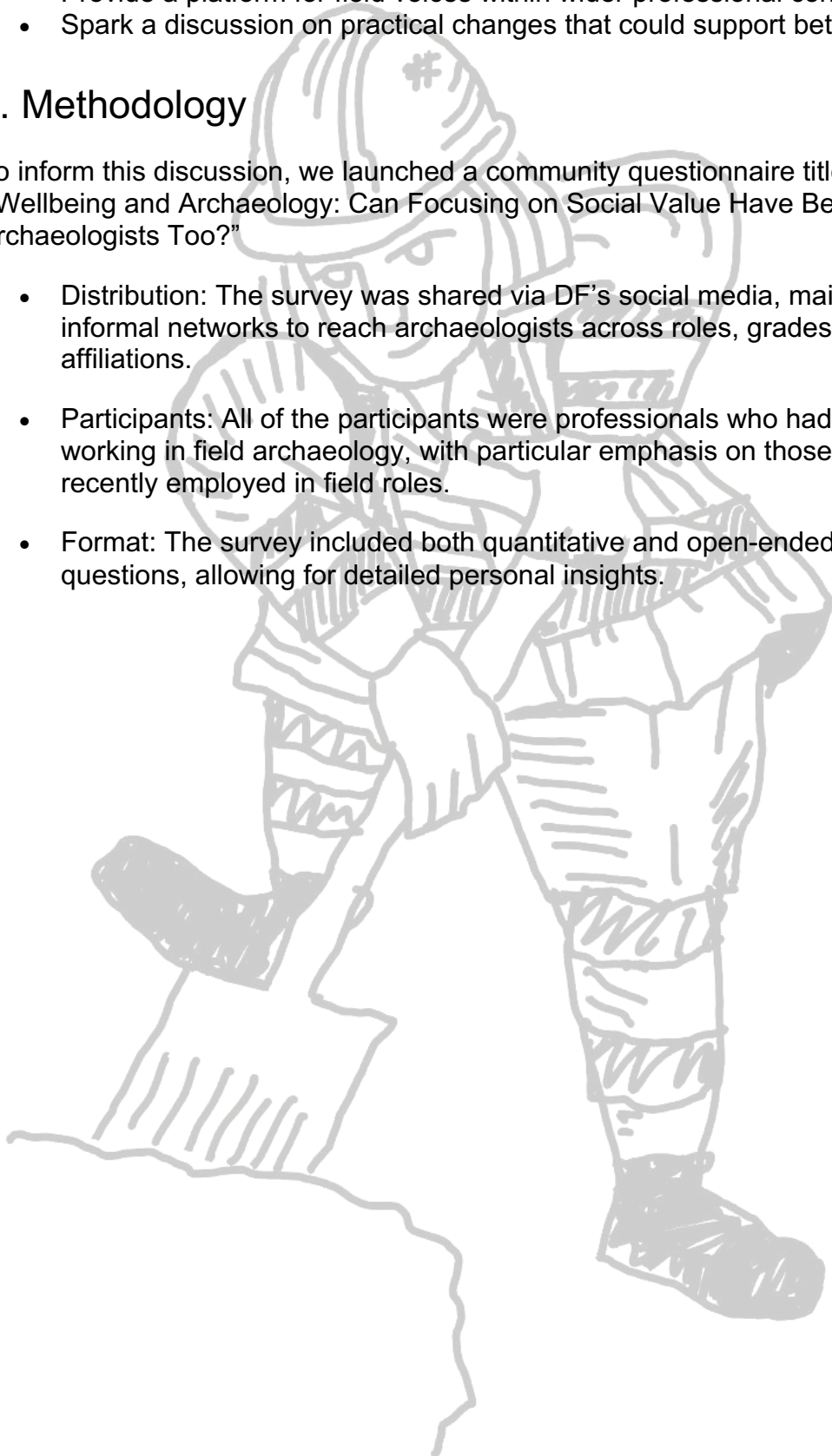
This survey and session aimed to:

- Understand how field archaeologists perceive their own wellbeing.
- Explore whether a stronger focus on social value could improve working lives.
- Provide a platform for field voices within wider professional conversations.
- Spark a discussion on practical changes that could support better outcomes

3. Methodology

To inform this discussion, we launched a community questionnaire titled: "Wellbeing and Archaeology: Can Focusing on Social Value Have Benefits for Archaeologists Too?"

- Distribution: The survey was shared via DF's social media, mailing lists, and informal networks to reach archaeologists across roles, grades, and affiliations.
- Participants: All of the participants were professionals who had experience working in field archaeology, with particular emphasis on those currently or recently employed in field roles.
- Format: The survey included both quantitative and open-ended qualitative questions, allowing for detailed personal insights.



4. Results

4.1 Participants

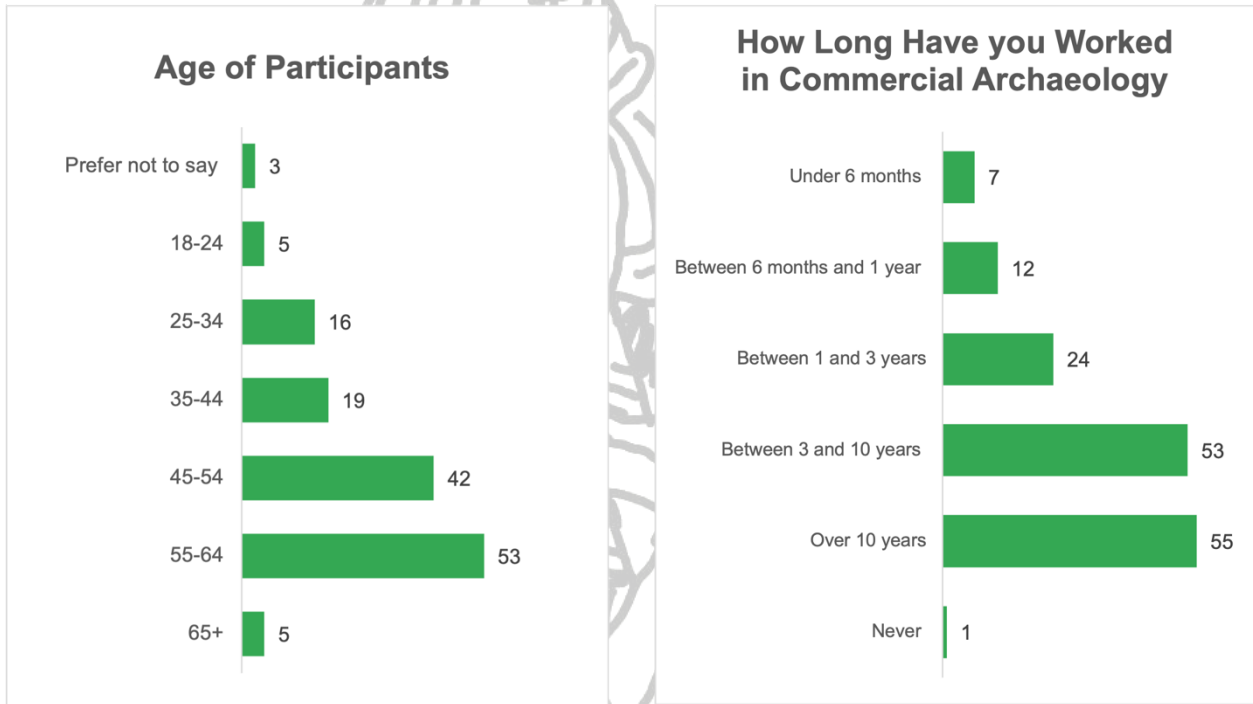


Figure 1: Age of Participants

Figure 2: How Long Have You Worked in Commercial Archaeology?

152 individuals responded to the survey, sharing insights into the profession from a range of perspectives. All of the participants answered that they had experience in field archaeology, with 59% still active in the field. As demonstrated in **Error! Reference source not found.**, the age of participants was varied, with 63% aged between 25 and 44. This is complimented by the range of experience that the participants had in commercial archaeology, with 70% having over 3 years of experience according to *Figure 2*.

4.2 How does/did working as a Commercial Archaeologist affect your mental wellbeing?

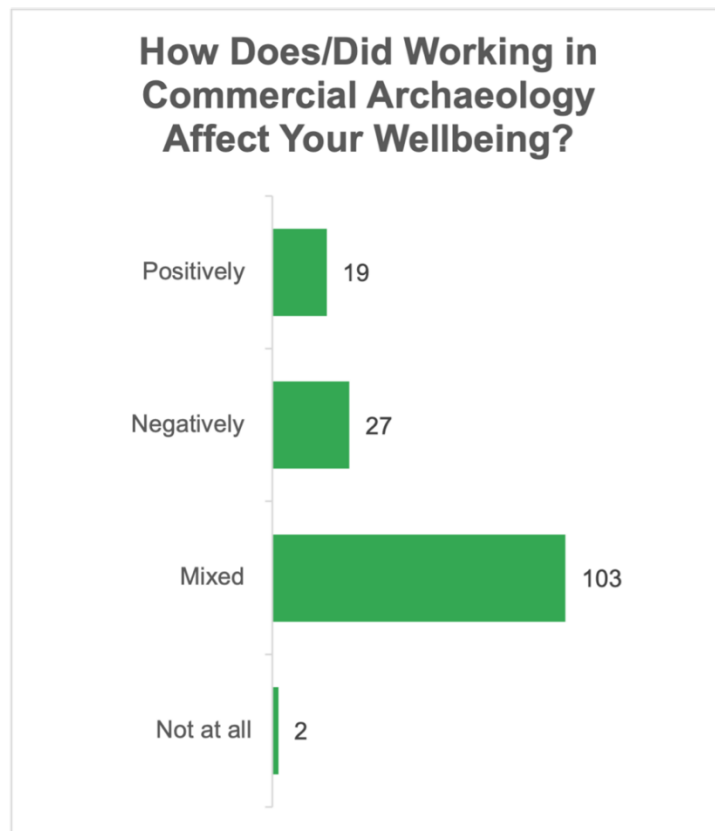


Figure 3: How Does/Did Working in Commercial Archaeology Affect Your Wellbeing?

To understand whether the profession of commercial archaeology is making practitioners 'miserable' we asked our participants '*how does/did working in commercial archaeology affect your wellbeing?*'. As visualised in Figure 3, 68% of the participants felt mixed about this question, in keeping with the nuance of the conversation.

Significantly, 99% of participants agreed that commercial archaeology had an impact on their wellbeing, with only two responses answering that the profession had no impact. These results were accompanied by comments discussing what aspects of commercial archaeology positively or negatively affected the participants' wellbeing.

The 124 responses reflecting on the positives of fieldwork fell into the themes of: contribution to the field, travelling, problem solving, working with a range of people, preserving cultural heritage, being outdoors, the social aspect, love of the subject archaeology and engaging with the public.

On the other hand, the 133 responses relating to the negatives of fieldwork reflected on: work conditions, travelling/away work, work pressure, long hours/working hours, low pay, lack of recognition, short contracts, lack of stability and discrimination

4.3 Do you/ did you experience the wider social value of archaeology in your day-to-day work as a Field Archaeologist?

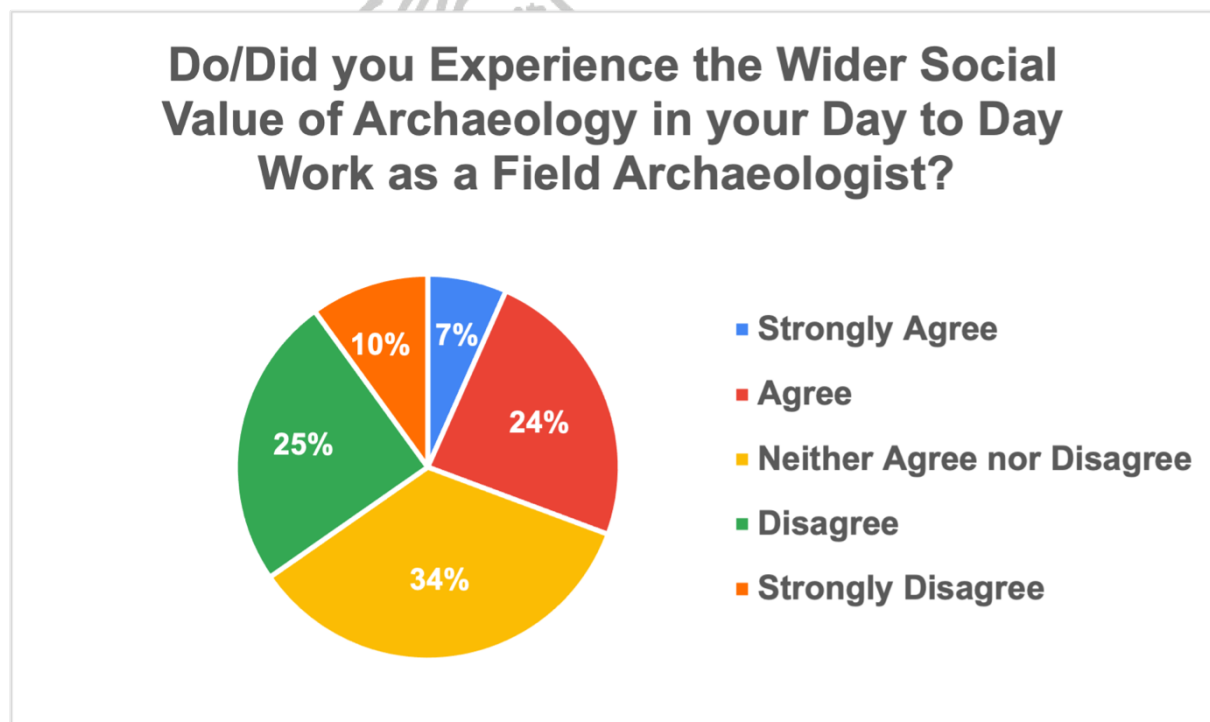


Figure 4: Do/Did you Experience the Wider Social Value of Archaeology in your Day to Day Work as a Field Archaeologist?⁴

To introduce the theme of social value in commercial fieldwork we wanted to understand if this was a feature of the job that practitioners experience in the workplace. For the purpose of this survey, social value was defined as the positive impacts of your work beyond its profitability, which could include positive influence on individuals, on communities or on wider society.

Similarly to the responses to other parts of this survey, the results were very mixed (see *Figure 4*). 35% of participants disagreed, 34% of participants neither agreed nor disagreed, and 31% agreed.

Following on from this question, participants who agreed that they experience social value were asked to describe in what way they experience this. 50 participants commented. Three main themes arose from this, with 32 responses mentioning public engagement, 12 comments mentioning working within a team, and 15 comments referring to aspects of archaeology in itself.

4.4 What would you change to increase the wellbeing benefits of archaeology in day-to-day fieldwork?

There was a total of 121 comments in response to this question (79% of participants), giving a valuable insight into areas of the profession where change is being called for.

The key themes arising from these comments consisted of

- Unsustainability of consistent travel long term
- Pay inequalities in contrast to other profession
- Difficulties with accessing health resources and poor welfare when working away
- Insufficient staffing/budgeting adding pressure to staff members
- Desire for more training opportunities across levels
- Support with career development
- Staff enrichment opportunities

4.5 Would a greater focus on the social value of archaeology increase your mental wellbeing when doing fieldwork?

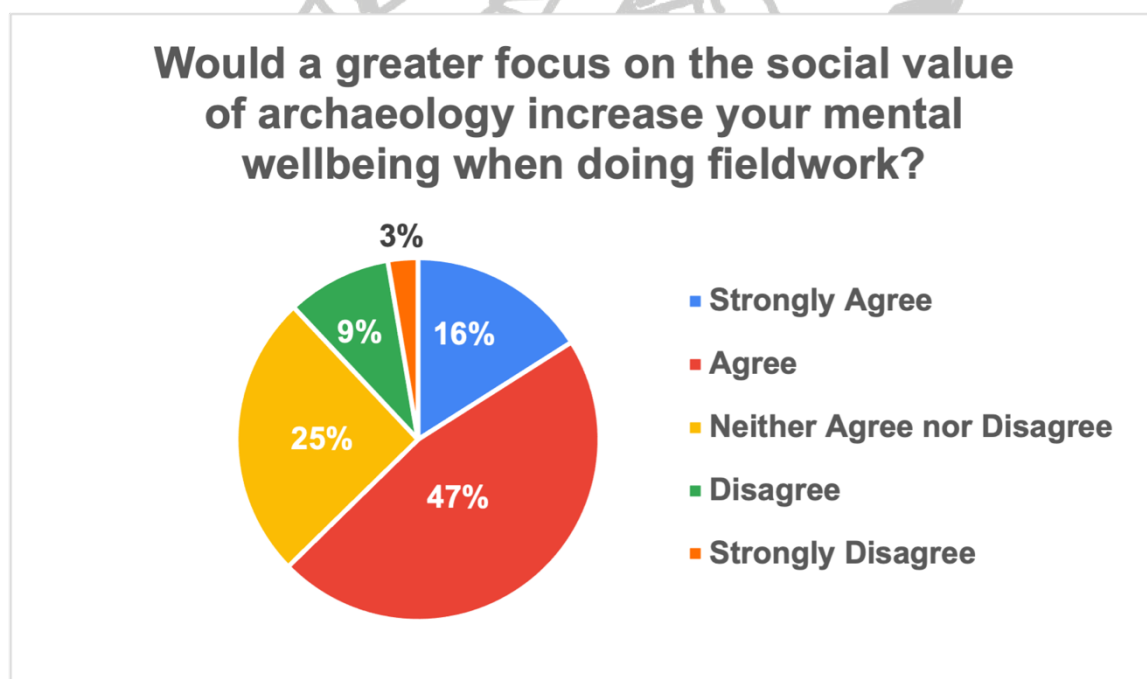


Figure 5: Would a greater focus on the social value of archaeology increase your mental wellbeing when doing fieldwork?

Continuing from the previous question we asked whether practitioners felt (Figure 5) that increasing social value would have wellbeing benefits. 63% of responses agreed that a greater focus would be beneficial to their mental wellbeing. This contrasts with 12% who disagreed, and 25% who did not feel strongly either way.

What do you Feel Provides Social Value to Commercial Fieldwork?

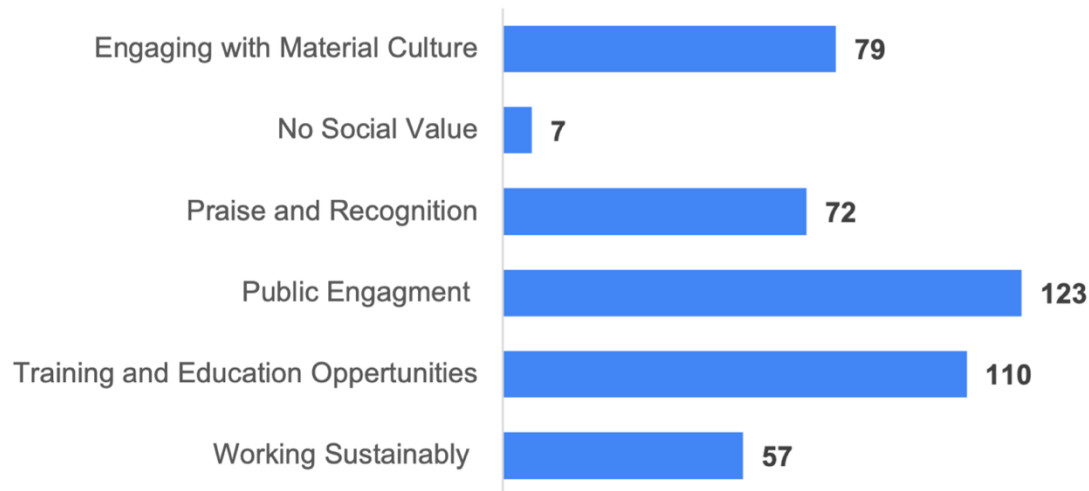


Figure 6: What Do You Feel Provides Social Value to Commercial Fieldwork?

Following from this, participants were asked 'what do you feel provides social value to commercial fieldwork?' and were presented with a list of potential answers and given the opportunity to select those which applied to them (Figure 6). The most related to answer was 'Public Engagement' (81%) and the least was 'Working Sustainably' (38%). 5% of participants felt that there is no social value to archaeology.

In addition to this, participants were given the option to comment. There were 17 responses which had themes that consisted of:

- Diversity in the work force
- General staff wellbeing
- Media recognition and PR
- Innovation
- Higher pay and full-time contracts
- Commercial engagement

4.6 Have you been involved in a commercial project that promotes wellbeing or social value?

Finally, we asked participants whether that had been involved in a commercial project that had promoted themes of wellbeing or social value. 70% had not been part of a project with these priorities, and 30% responded that they had.

Participants who had been on social wellbeing focused project were asked which factors that positively impacted their wellbeing. 44 individuals commented. 22 of these comments mentioned the benefits of working with the public. 8 comments mentioned a strong team culture. Also frequently mentioned in comments were making a wider positive impact, sharing skills and a sense of belonging. 8

comments (18%) said that they felt that there were no positive impacts as a result of this kind of commercial project.

5. Key Findings

The responses provided a compelling snapshot of the current field experience. Key themes included:

5.1 Meaningful Work and Purpose

Many archaeologists cited the value of meaningful, community-engaged projects. Where work felt connected to public knowledge and heritage, respondents reported increased pride and motivation.

“When I’m on a dig that actively includes the public or contributes to real learning, I feel like I’m doing something that matters.”

“Several projects have championed community growth through thoughtful initiatives. These endeavours often prioritise positive social impact alongside economic considerations. Such projects can foster a sense of belonging and shared purpose. The collaborative nature of these projects strengthens community bonds. We are inspired by the dedication to positive change demonstrated in such work.”

“I’ve worked for commercial organisations that orchestrated public open days and local school visits to the site. Even though I wasn’t directly involved, I felt pretty chuffed to be working somewhere that was so fascinating for everyone - and it helped me see the site for more than just the ditch I’d been digging in!”

5.2 Social Connection and Collaboration

Projects that encouraged teamwork, communication, and shared responsibility helped foster morale and resilience.

“Being part of a supportive team makes all the difference. You feel seen, not just used.”

5.3 Structural Barriers to Wellbeing

Despite positive experiences, systemic issues repeatedly undermined wellbeing. These included:

- Lack of structured training and mentorship: Early-career archaeologists felt underprepared and unsupported.
- Poor work-life balance: Prolonged away work and isolation from social supports were common.
- Physical toll and lack of healthcare support: There were calls for better safety standards and basic health insurance.
- Stagnant wages and limited progression: Especially for those who wished to remain in the field rather than move into management.

- Feeling undervalued: Communication from employers often focused on criticism rather than recognition or encouragement.

“Working with people involved in archaeology because they enjoy it rather than feeling trapped in a low paid job [has an impact on my wellbeing]. Gallows humour in the field can start to twist your perception if that's all you ever see and hear. Especially if already stressed from worry about bills, rent and food.”

6. Discussion

At the centre of this survey was an aim to understand how archaeologists perceive their wellbeing and whether social value could be a mechanism to improve this. The results demonstrate the enthusiasm that many fieldworkers have to experience social value through public engagement, recognition and CPD.

The results show that archaeologists thrive when they:

- Feel valued and included.
- Work in environments that prioritise both physical and mental health.
- Have opportunities for growth, autonomy, and purpose.

While there is evident passion and commitment among field archaeologists, these positive drivers are often eroded by institutional structures. Simply asking individuals to “be more resilient” ignores the broader need for cultural and organisational change.

The idea of “social value” needs to evolve to include the wellbeing of archaeological workers themselves. If archaeology is to offer genuine public benefit, it must also be a viable, humane profession for those carrying it out.

7. Conclusion and Recommendations

Key Conclusions:

- Wellbeing in archaeology is not just a personal matter; it is shaped by working conditions and institutional values.
- Social value must include valuing the people doing the work.
- Supportive environments, ethical projects, and meaningful engagement all contribute to improved morale and retention.

Recommendations:

1. Embed wellbeing into project planning and funding models.
2. Include fieldworker perspectives in decision-making processes.
3. Create structured career pathways that allow for progression within field roles.
4. Improve health and safety standards and explore healthcare provision.

5. Encourage public archaeology projects that also support internal team wellbeing.

8. Next Steps

The Diggers' Forum is committed to continuing this conversation. We welcome feedback and further involvement from the community, particularly from current field archaeologists who would like to help shape the profession's future.

We are thankful to all the individuals who participated in our survey for the wealth of information that they have provided us with. We aim to continue interpreting this data to continue the conversation around wellbeing and archaeology.

We are also seeking new committee members to help us represent field voices and advocate for change. If you're interested, please get in touch.

