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The importance of trust: Communities of practice in public engagement in development-led archaeology

Sara Perry, MOLA

sperry@mola.org.uk

@archaeologistsp

Who are archaeology's audiences?

How and why do they get involved?

What meanings are they attributing to the archaeological record and the work of archaeologists?

What is archaeology doing to cater to them – or to you specifically?

Who is included? Excluded? Who would prefer not to be involved?

These are some of the questions underlying the Archaeology Audience Network (AAN), a collaboration funded by the Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport (DCMS) and The National Lottery through The Heritage Fund's Digital Skills for Heritage initiative. The AAN brings together various archaeological organisations in England, including MOLA (Museum of London Archaeology), the Archaeology Data Service (ADS), Oxford Archaeology, Wessex Archaeology, York Archaeological Trust (YAT), DigVentures, and the Council for British Archaeology (CBA), who work to deliver public benefit from archaeology. We represent just a few members of a huge community of practice pursuing such work, so the AAN was developed to address two clear needs:



Figure 1. MOLA team members delivering public engagement activities.

- (1) The need to pool data from our various public-facing projects to better understand, in the round, who is and isn't being catered for via development-led archaeology, and what effects these projects have on their audiences. In the best-case scenario, pooling our data would allow us to co-design more informed, targeted and impactful programmes with audiences, as well as address current gaps in service. We could also then support other organisations and community groups in doing the same.
- (2) The need to break down barriers between organisations operating in development-led archaeology to make the pooling of our data - and collaboration more generally – possible in the first instance. In the best-case scenario, such breaking down of barriers would lead to more solidarity, joint efforts at innovation, shared – yet distributed – work, and tighter connections between regions (and the populations and community groups across those regions). This would then set the stage for wider structural change in the profession of archaeology (which has long been called for by many different individuals).

Both of these needs respond to wider trends in the arts, humanities and social sciences, where it is widely acknowledged that lack of open and standardised data about audiences,

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lack of collaboration, and lack of workforce skills in data analysis and evaluation are hampering social impact (e.g., see the [Digital Impact in Museums & Galleries](#) report, December 2022). As [Cornerstones of Culture, the final report of the Commission on Culture and Local Government](#), puts it, “The best place-led cultural strategies are informed by evidence and have the approach to collecting data and evaluating their success established from the start, but it is acknowledged that in many areas of the country capacity to deliver this is limited and there is the potential for significant duplication of effort.”

Within archaeology, and as we have [discussed elsewhere](#), there is some larger-scale audience research (e.g. [Heritage Counts](#); [NEARCH](#); [MORI 2000](#)) and many small-scale, bespoke audience studies available to help us understand the nature of audiences interested in the discipline. These provide valuable insights about who is participating and why, but the data are not comparable – and in fact often aren’t actually accessible to compare. As a result, it is virtually impossible to scale up our understandings or to genuinely develop our capacity to respond to audience needs and gaps. We started the AAN, then, from the premise that if we pooled data from some of the most prolific deliverers of public engagement in archaeology in England (working collectively with 10s of 1000s of people annually), we might have the baseline from which to develop richer methodologies for evaluating and learning from audience experiences.

I am one of the leads of the AAN, supported by an incredible team at MOLA, including Dr Kate Faccia who brings complementary expertise from the [Future Leaders Fellowship on archaeology for public benefit](#). My colleague Magnus Copps and I, in conversation with our partner organisations, submitted the bid for the AAN part-way through the pandemic. We launched the Network in 2021 whilst we continued to deal with multiple lockdowns and with recovering from the shutdown or complete rescoping of most of our public engagement programmes. For some partners, this was their first formal collaboration with others in the group. Importantly, I believe for many of us, it was also the first time we were sharing raw evaluation data (anonymised, GDPR-compliant) between us – some of which was bound to include negative, indifferent or mediocre feedback from community audiences. In other words, it was a new venture with many uncertainties and potential vulnerabilities for me and, I think, all involved.

In our first online public training session in November 2021, attended by 159 individuals, we presented the findings from the AAN’s early efforts to pool our data. The transcripts and resources from this session are available [online](#), and the recording is available [on YouTube](#). These findings effectively reinforced what we knew from the broader evaluation context – i.e., that where standard data are collected, they are primarily demographic in



Figure 2. Our first public introduction to the AAN, including discussion of our efforts at pooling our data, are available on YouTube - <https://youtu.be/lfWZ359jqGY>.

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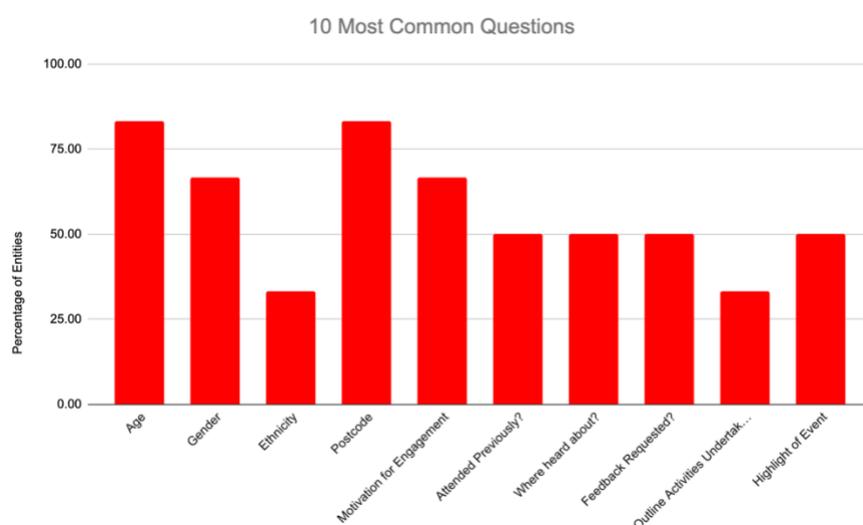


Figure 3. The ten most common data categories collected about audiences engaging with archaeology, most of which centre on demographics and activities, as opposed to impacts.

nature; that outcomes-oriented data (i.e., what effects did the activities have on the audiences?) are sparse or inconsistent; and that the majority of these data are not collected in ways that make them easily comparable. More positively, we do have enough information to be able to publish an ADS Guide to Audience Data, to add to their series of [Good Practice Guides](#). We hope this will support the sector,

including community groups, academic researchers, commercial organisations and others, in collecting basic categories of audience data in ways that make them comparable and FAIR (Findable, Accessible, Interoperable, Reusable).

In the absence of definitive results from this exercise in pooling our data, the AAN in conversation with our funders - and after reflecting on mid-term programme evaluation results compiled by our evaluator - rethought our approach. Some pre-planned activities carried on, including Wessex Archaeology's successful online workshop [Developing Audiences for Archaeology Inclusion Projects](#). Here the team explored how to broaden audiences for archaeology using inclusive approaches, covering everything from recruitment, and programme design to wellbeing and impact measurement. An interesting finding from the audience data for this workshop was that participants who considered themselves to be employed in heritage registered lower confidence levels in engagement and inclusion delivery than those who considered themselves volunteers.



Figure 4. Wessex Archaeology's online workshop on inclusive archaeology projects was subsequently adapted into an intensive mentoring programme delivered in collaboration with York Archaeological Trust and MOLA.

The CBA, with facilitation by Resources for Change, also hosted a more intimate audience discovery workshop on the topic of [Audience Impact and Data Collection](#). Here they purposefully limited enrolment to a small group to ensure depth of engagement by

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attendees. Together they discussed approaches to data collection, including reflections on the role of audience data in shaping programme design and impacting on funding success.

In light of the wider ambitions of the AAN and the remaining time available, we also rescoped activities to work more collaboratively, more consciously focused on reuse and on achieving maximum potential out of what we had already achieved together so far. (Note activities are always free of charge.)

- Wessex Archaeology partnered with YAT and MOLA to turn their online workshop into a three-month, in-depth [mentoring programme](#), for up to six participating groups. Four projects, totalling seven participants, completed the programme, all seeking to realise new forms of inclusion. One has already been successful in receiving funding and kicks off in Spring 2023.

- Oxford Archaeology and DigVentures partnered to deliver a six-week online [Audience Development for Archaeologists](#) course, currently in progress and offering flexible options for people to attend live or catch up afterwards. The course covers everything from mobilising audiences and alternative fundraising to evaluation and qualitative data gathering. It has seen 400 people registered from a variety of backgrounds and representing 36 different countries.



Figure 5. DigVentures and Oxford Archaeology's sold-out course on audience development wraps up this month (February 2023).

- Last month, the ADS ran a workshop on *Engaging Public and Community Archaeology with the ADS*, limited to a small group of invited representatives of different organisations and communities. Here the team offered space for attendees to discuss how ADS resources could be employed through community archaeology activities and how they could be made more useful and accessible for different audiences in the future. Off the back of this small workshop, two subsequent events hosted collaboratively by the ADS, CBA and MOLA will carry on working with specific audiences to explore how the ADS could support their use of the resources available from the ADS. Our focal audiences here are community groups and citizens not employed in archaeology, and people who are accessing Historic Environment Records or Heritage Gateway. If you identify as being part of one of those audiences, please get in touch (aan@mola.org.uk).

Beyond this programming, we have been supporting individuals and organisations who approach us independently with enquiries around funding applications, around reaching specific audience groups, and for general advice as it pertains to achieving real public value from archaeology. Anyone can reach out to the AAN via aan@mola.org.uk or by contacting MOLA or myself directly. We are looking ahead now to the future of the AAN – growing the

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positive relationships that we have cultivated within the Network, welcoming others, maintaining momentum as the funded portion of our work comes to a close, and ensuring that our learnings and outputs have a meaningful legacy, including our forthcoming *ADS Guide to Good Practice with Audience Data*, and our *Digital Skills for Heritage: Connected Heritage - How to Guide*.

As reflected in our forthcoming *Connected Heritage* guide, for me the most profound take-away to date from the AAN has been one that might otherwise seem obvious: **trust** between collaborating organisations, between those organisations and other constituencies, and between those constituencies and broader citizens, has been critical and requires **time**. Doing the vast majority of this work in online spaces requires even more trust (and hence time), which means that a considerable portion of the AAN has inadvertently focused on trying to foster a 'psychologically safe' environment (after [Amy Edmundson](#), also [Dan Farmer](#)) where partners could feel supported in speaking candidly and constructively to one another. As we began to bring others into the AAN, the need to maintain and extend psychological safety even further became more prominent, requiring even more trust and time. This has naturally demanded of everyone the patience, care and courage to share complex and challenging information in constructive ways, and to learn the working patterns and styles of all in the room in order to continue fostering such patience and care.

Our enquiries through the AAN into the audiences archaeologists currently reach indicate that we have much work still to do to make 'the room' meaningful and accessible to the vast majority of people. It needs to be a welcoming and comfortable space, and what the AAN has taught me is that if many of us delivering archaeology for public benefit do not ourselves often feel welcome and comfortable, then we are unlikely to be able to offer a productive environment for others to feel they belong too.

Importantly, I believe that we *have* created in the AAN one seedbed (hopefully of many) for a more generous and safe archaeology in England that will realise myriad public benefits. This is an environment where we design programmes that are more tailored and deep in impact for audiences, that are delivered collaboratively rather than by organisations operating alone or isolated, that prioritise and actively advocate for reuse and re-mixing of resources (including sharing resources that might not previously have been freely shared between groups or institutions), and that collect common data about impacts on audiences that are openly available for others to learn from and to constructively critique. There is still much trust to gain to achieve such an environment, but I hope you too might feel welcome to join the AAN's 'room' as we carry on building communities for genuine public impact in British archaeology.