

Is archaeology sustainable? *An early-career perspective*

For the 2023 ClfA conference in Nottingham, I presented a paper for the session *Building a sustainable future*. In my work with the ClfA Early Career Special Interest Group, and through working in developer-led archaeology, I have gotten to know many early-career archaeologists and have become very aware of the issues facing those entering the sector.

Being asked to give an early-career perspective on the sustainability of archaeology as a profession, I felt that it was important to highlight the perspectives of a range of early careerists. I conducted a survey to collect insights, ultimately recording the responses of 27 early-career archaeologists and seven former archaeologists who had left the sector. The results were poignant, and I believe it is vital that we as a sector consider these voices and work to implement positive change.

When asked what made a career sustainable, survey respondents stated that a role should

- be secure
- be financially viable
- have a low risk of physical injury and burn-out
- be generally supportive of health
- be supportive of professional growth
- promote a healthy work–life balance

Unfortunately, 64 per cent of the same respondents felt that their careers were not sustainable, with a further 16 per cent stating that they were unsure.

Despite the relatively small sample size, this response should concern us all. That only one fifth of the survey sample believed that their roles met the bare minimum criteria of sustainability is worrying. As one respondent noted: *'We shouldn't have to choose between work and how we would like to live our lives.'* Several issues came up frequently, such as the lack of apparent work–life balance, which in many cases is likely the result of long commutes and extended periods of away work. Other respondents noted low pay, with one individual commenting: *'I can't support my family on my current*

wages.' This is an issue that has been noted extensively within the sector, and is the subject of Prospect Union's campaign 'World Class Heritage, Second Class Pay', as well as featuring heavily in BAJR's Poverty Impact Report. Other issues indicated by respondents were health problems exacerbated by physical work, and staff not feeling valued or supported within their roles.

We are losing people from the sector early in their careers as a direct result of these concerns. When asked why they had left, former archaeologists said that they felt their roles were not sustainable long term, and noted the pressures of away work, low pay, unpaid overtime or commutes, poor work–life balance, and workplace sexism. Some 45 per cent of the current early-career archaeologists surveyed responded that they were unlikely to stay in archaeology for more than two years. If their current contract ended, 50 per cent reported that they would be unlikely or very unlikely to remain in the sector.

What does this mean in a profession with notoriously short contracts?

Maybe the question we should be asking, in light of this information, is: why do people stay?

It is clear from the survey results that archaeology is a passion for many. Even those who felt that their roles were unsustainable mentioned a love for archaeology, and, conversely to those who had left or were planning to leave, those who wanted to stay said that they felt supported and valued. Respondents particularly praised employers who *understood* their work–life balance and childcare commitments.

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So what can we do?

A few suggestions would be to

- support staff to maintain a healthy work–life balance
- pay staff fairly at all levels
- put an end to unpaid overtime
- support staff with their mental and physical health
- provide stability with permanent contracts where possible

In the time between presenting my paper at the annual conference and the publication of this article, I myself have left developer-led archaeology. This is due, in part, to many of the issues discussed here and felt keenly by my fellow early-career archaeologists.

I will leave you with the same closing thoughts as voiced in my presentation in April:

The future of archaeology must be sustainable, otherwise there is no future in archaeology.



Megan Schlanker

Megan is chair of the ClfA Early Careers Special Interest Group and began working in development-led archaeology in 2021. She is passionate about promoting inclusion in archaeology and supporting early-career archaeologists to reach their full potential.