

Enhancing public benefit and social value in developer-led archaeology: ALGAO Scotland's guidance

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Engagement with local schools. Using the results of archaeology with North Berwick Primary School to gain their John Muir Awards. Credit: East Lothian Council

We know that archaeology plays a crucial role in shaping our understanding of the past, yet its true value extends far beyond academic research. In Scotland, the Association of Local Government Archaeological Officers (ALGAO) published guidance in 2023 to ensure that developer-led archaeology delivers tangible public benefits and social value. The opportunity for such guidance arose from the new National Planning Framework in Scotland, which included, for the first time in historic environment policies, 'other activities' to be delivered alongside the traditional mitigation of excavation, recording, analysis, archiving and publication. This wording recognises the importance of integrating archaeology into wider community engagement, education and social wellbeing, fostering a stronger connection between people and their heritage.

The intention of the guidance is to therefore align developer-led archaeology with broader societal objectives. Traditionally, archaeology in the planning and development process has focused on compliance, mitigation and preservation, meaning the wider benefits and value of this work has not always been obvious. However, there is increasing recognition that archaeological work should not only protect heritage assets but also generate, on a more consistent basis, meaningful benefits for local communities and the public at large.

By providing a structured approach, the guidance encourages archaeologists, developers and local authorities to embed tangible public benefit into their projects from the outset. This shift in focus ensures that archaeological work contributes positively to social cohesion, education and community identity, rather than being seen as an isolated technical requirement.

To achieve this, the guidance identifies several key outcomes and benefits associated with integrating public benefit and social value into developer-led archaeology:

- 1 enhanced community engagement** – encouraging active participation in archaeological projects through volunteering, workshops and site visits fosters a sense of ownership and pride in local heritage
- 2 educational opportunities** – schools and universities can benefit from tailored learning materials, public lectures and digital resources derived from archaeological investigations
- 3 health and wellbeing** – public involvement in archaeology has been shown to improve mental health and wellbeing by fostering social connections and providing outdoor learning experiences
- 4 economic and tourism growth** – heritage-focused initiatives, such as site interpretation, exhibitions and guided tours, contribute to local economies by attracting visitors and promoting cultural tourism
- 5 sustainable heritage management** – embedding public value ensures that archaeological discoveries are not only preserved but also made accessible and meaningful for future generations

By setting these objectives, ALGAO's guidance aims to transform the perception of archaeology from a regulatory hurdle into a valuable community asset.

For archaeology to deliver these benefits effectively, key stakeholders – including developers, planning authorities and heritage professionals – must collaborate to integrate public benefit into project designs. The guidance outlines several practical approaches to achieving this:

- **early consultation and planning** – identifying opportunities for public engagement at the project's inception ensures that benefits are maximised and integrated seamlessly
- **creative interpretation strategies** – using digital platforms, social media and interactive storytelling enhances accessibility and engagement with archaeological findings
- **partnership working** – collaborating with local schools, historical societies

and community groups broadens participation and knowledge-sharing

- **post-excavation outreach** – ensuring that findings are communicated through reports, exhibitions and educational materials extends the impact of archaeological work beyond the dig site

While the guidance establishes a strong foundation, its successful implementation requires ongoing effort. Some key next steps include

- 1 **raising awareness** – promoting the guidance among developers, planners and local authorities to ensure widespread adoption
- 2 **training and capacity building** – equipping archaeologists with the necessary skills to design and deliver effective public engagement strategies
- 3 **monitoring and evaluation** – developing standard metrics to assess the social value and public benefit of archaeology projects to refine best practices over time
- 4 **policy integration** – encouraging government bodies to embed these principles into other heritage policies and heritage management frameworks
- 5 **leveraging digital innovation** – exploring new technologies such as virtual reality, 3D modelling and augmented reality to enhance public interaction with archaeological discoveries

The ALGAO guidance represents a change in focus towards ensuring that archaeology serves not just as a tool for preservation but as a catalyst for social value. By embedding public benefit at the core of developer-led projects, the sector can contribute more meaningfully to education, community cohesion and economic development. The success of this initiative will depend on collaboration, innovation and a shared commitment to making archaeology accessible and impactful for all. It is also critical that we gather and publish those metrics to demonstrate not only that this work is happening, but to show the positive impact that archaeology is having on those outside of the sector itself.



Front cover of the ALGAO Guidance on delivering public benefit and social value.



Engagement with local communities. Working with the community to reconstruct a roundhouse in Haddington as a means for them to understand the remains of one uncovered during local excavations. Credit: East Lothian Council

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