

ClfA 'Influence': presenting a social value profession in a fiscal world

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With all that's happening in the world in 2025, we could be forgiven for not giving great fanfare to the quietly approaching milestone of three decades of historic environment management, primarily justified because of its importance to people.

We have come a long way since the early days of archaeology as an integrated part of the planning system and the earliest articulation, by UK heritage agencies and professionals, that the importance of the past is rooted in effects that it can have for present day communities: the principles that it is a shared resource, and that as professionals, we have the responsibility to help people understand places and engage with the past.

Over this period, archaeologists have developed a diverse toolkit of methods to deliver social value. We have been able to respond both to academic trends in critical heritage and to external frameworks, like corporate ESG (Environment, Social Governance) standards.

But it has not been an easy few decades. In England, despite the energy of New Labour in the 1990s, the then government didn't have a lot of time for stuffy old heritage – synonymous, in their minds, with backwards-looking Britain. By the mid-2000s, advocates for the historic environment had broken through with positive messaging about the power of heritage. These years were, in hindsight, the halcyon days of opportunity – with historic environment sector leaders working closely with government on new policy centred on social value. But this

was shattered by the financial crash of 2008, and while the sector was successful in getting policies like *Planning Policy Statement 5* over the line in 2010, an almost immediate reset with the coalition government's austerity policies followed.

Confidence in archaeological business growth and resourcing of services like HERs has been a rollercoaster, and there has been a perception, widely held, that we have not moved as fast as we wanted on the fulfilment of archaeology's social value potential. Similar swings can be observed in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, buffeted by the same macro-economic winds and a few of their own political challenges.

Now the (not so) new Labour government in Westminster is also battenning down the

Oxford
Archaeology staff
showing local MP
Charlotte Cane
results from
projects in her
constituency.
Credit: Oxford
Archaeology



hatches and zipping up the Sou'wester for a fiscally driven, hard-nosed approach to government – focused on growth, with little time for (as one official who shall remain nameless recently put it me) the 'soft and fluffies'. Today's advocates are having to make the same case as in the late 90s, that heritage and archaeology are relevant contributors to societal health, wealth and happiness and that their value to construction, education and the environment are worth investing in for these reasons.

How should ClfA set out to influence key stakeholders around the concept of social value in this political landscape? What is the process, and do we need to adapt our core message for the profession in these times?

Ultimately, it will not be enough to speak to government only in terms of the cost of archaeology. Because even if archaeology is cheap, efficient and effective – never stopping a development or unduly slowing a bulldozer – efficiency is not a reason for existing. Our purpose is not to preserve, nor simply to record, but to inform, educate

and inspire. You can build a house without archaeology, but if your goal is to build a community, create a sense of place and improve people's wellbeing, then archaeology is a value-adding tool that can help to deliver these positive outcomes.

This is why ClfA's Influence strategy sets out to make the necessary connections with government, the archaeology sector and our client sectors, with a strong message of social value at its core.

With the archaeology sector, ClfA is highlighting best practice on public benefit, and providing training and resources in association with expert members to help encourage wider take-up of the range of publicly beneficial outcomes. ClfA is also encouraging professional practice reform, for example, through the 21st Century Challenges for Archaeology Programme – supporting projects to improve outcomes from archaeological publication for the public (CBA's 'PUNS2') and improve the ways that research synthesis can be undertaken through planning (led by the British Academy). We are also involved with sector projects working to elucidate opportunities for government's Culture and Heritage Capital programme, and Historic England-led work to raise the profile of

wellbeing outcomes from archaeology with the government.

With the government, we are continually underlining the fact that, while opportunities should be capitalised upon to enhance efficiency and streamline approaches to archaeology, the better solution would be to make changes which promote a clearer focus on outcomes, and which make explicit the purpose of delivering social value. This may be through the amendments to planning policy to include reference to a wider range of public benefit activities, or by working with Registered Organisations to engage MPs with the positive work being done in their local areas. In recent weeks, ClfA has worked with Oxford Archaeology to meet Ely MP Charlotte Cane – a former professional archaeologist who fully recognises the social value potential of the discipline. And with Wessex Archaeology, ClfA presented to more than a dozen parliamentarians at the All Party Parliamentary Archaeology Group in Westminster, discussing the range of exciting social value tools they are using on projects, such as social prescribing at Well-City, Salisbury and working with prisoners at HMP Erlestoke, to deliver wellbeing outcomes for participants that



Wessex Archaeology's Community Engagement team at the Welsh language Eisteddfod yr Urdd event in Denbigh. Credit: Wessex Archaeology

can be highly impactful in making changes in participants' lives. These projects have the potential to deliver social benefits in terms of rehabilitation, recovery from mental health impacts, and re-engagement with society and work that are measurable social value outcomes for government.

Under ClfA's Influence strategy, it is also an objective over the coming three years to

improve engagement with academia and with client sectors. With the former group, connecting with academics (see, for example, the contribution from John Schofield and Andrea Bradley in the Closing session at the 2025 ClfA Conference) to highlight new approaches to practice and interrogate them in the context of commercial archaeology as part of ClfA's 'thought leadership'. With the

latter, this is trying to establish relationships in new ways to help archaeologists plug into structures for social value, and using the potential of archaeology to build strong relationships with communities they're working in.

As an example, ClfA's current work with solar farm developers has an emphasis not only on proportionality of archaeological works, but also on the positive social outcomes that can be achieved in terms of community engagement and the understanding of sites – added value that is often overlooked in the clamour to deliver the climate benefits of these schemes.

The examples in this issue of *The Archaeologist* are all fantastic cases that ClfA can promote as part of its Influence work. There may be challenges in the current economic and political climate that necessitate that we go back to basics to challenge opponents who imply that archaeology is a 'blocker' – and we will defend our processes and efficiency and seek to streamline and strengthen our methods where we can. But we are not only enablers of development because of our efficient processes. We are, first and foremost, enablers of social value. We must be forthright about presenting these benefits as being critical to archaeology, and archaeology's contribution to placemaking, health and wellbeing, the environment, *and* the economy.



A reconstruction of Bulford Henges by Illustrator Jennie Anderson. Credit: Wessex Archaeology



Behind the scenes of *Beyond the Stones*, Wessex Archaeology's first feature-length documentary, which was created with support from the National Trust and celebrates the 35th anniversary of the Stonehenge and Avebury World Heritage Site. Credit: Wessex Archaeology