
Wellbeing Guidance: Creating a culture of care for museums and community partners

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Introduction

01



Thackray Museum of Medicine

This guidance has been developed to support applicants to the Esmée Fairbairn Communities and Collections Fund to create a culture of care, where the wellbeing of all those involved is centred and prioritised. This can only be achieved by thinking and planning proactively, and working carefully and responsively throughout the funding period, and beyond. The potential negative impact on wellbeing of those involved does not always stop at the point a project ends.

In this guidance we will explore some of the key aspects to take into consideration for wellbeing success. It is not an exhaustive list, and this is a dynamic area of practice, but it should give a good foundation on which to build, acknowledging that all projects, contexts and communities are different.

Within this guidance we will reference specific resources from the Museums Association’s [Wellbeing Hub](#), these resources will help you create a culture of care.

Developing your funded work

02



Introduction

The key starting point at centring wellbeing is to understand the nature of the work and its aims, the collection and the experiences of the community you will work with.

What are the aims?
Is this work issues-based?

All community focussed work will involve different communities facing issues based on their needs and experiences. Identifying whether the focus of your work is on these issues, or whether these issues are - as much as they can be - being left at the door, is critical. Both require an understanding, empathy and proactive approach to wellbeing, but where you will be working with a particular community that have experience of - for example - homelessness, or domestic abuse and violence and that experience is the substantive focus of the work, additional thought, resource and support needs to be built in for all those involved.

Will the collection be triggering?
Does this collection have a violent past?

If you will be working with collections, the nature of the collection, the aim of the work and the experiences of the community will affect the engagement and response to the collection. Understanding broadly what content or terminology may have a negative impact on wellbeing is critical to creating a safe space to engage.

Which communities are
you planning to work with?

We have already highlighted that having clarity of the aims of your work and whether the focus is issues-based or not is critical. Understanding specifically the potential experience of a community, and individual needs within the community will enable you to clearly reach out to community partners or advertise for participants. You might be able to do this through existing processes, for example your organisation may have an advisory panel, or through new channels and relationships, or facilitated by partners and agencies. These conversations will help you build in appropriate wellbeing support.

Reflecting on these three areas (aims, collections and communities or participants) creates a good foundation for exploring and developing a care-centred plan, application and ongoing relationships. Understanding past experiences of different types of work with collections and communities is invaluable in developing robust support for the wellbeing for all involved in your future plans. The following will also enable you to think about this deeply.

Communities of practice
and lessons learned

Community centred work, and work that is emotionally laden has increased across the sector over the last 10-15 years. There are lots of examples of projects and specific museum and community organisations that work successfully and responsibly together. In addition, there are professional networks that specialise in working in and supporting those working in this space, for example [Culture Health and Wellbeing Alliance](#), and [GLAM Cares](#), (for other organisations see the end of this guidance).

You can build understanding of community centred work by reaching out individually, reading associated case studies, see the end of this guidance, joining relevant networks, and specifically reading any Lesson Learned reports for projects of similar types within your own organisation or the sector. Undertaking this research will not mean that you have everything covered, as there will always be things that you hadn't thought about, or are unexpected, but it will enable you to feel confident that you have put in place the key elements to support the wellbeing for all involved.

Partners, service providers and agencies

In addition to the research above, a key asset within community centred work is the expert knowledge and understanding of community partners, service providers and referral agencies. These individuals and organisations have worked closely with specific communities in a variety of capacities, they understand their experiences, how they have engaged in the past, what has worked and what has not worked. Therefore, developing a workplan in partnership can ensure that support for the wellbeing of all involved is put in place. This may include access to training or supervision support.

Resourcing

Appropriate resourcing to support wellbeing is vital. From the Museums Association’s research into workforce wellbeing we know that the key factor having a negative impact on wellbeing was excessive demands and workload. This is an issue for all work within the sector, but there is an additional demand from undertaking emotionally laden work that needs to be appreciated, acknowledged and incorporated. The following are key points to be considered:

Time to develop trust between partners

It is easy to underestimate the amount of time it may take to establish trust to support participant attraction, engagement and confidence. This needs to be reflected in the duration of the project and the length of contracts to enable the demands of this work to be undertaken in a way that supports the wellbeing of everyone involved.

Time to develop working relationships

From our 2022 Workforce Wellbeing research we know that individuals’ wellbeing is most supported by a caring and empathic line manager and good co-worker relationships. At the beginning of the work, investing time to get to know those you are working with is critical to develop support. This is especially important where there may be emotionally-laden activities, experiences and outputs. Think carefully about how this will work if individuals are working at distance, or in a hybrid environment – where developing trust and rapport may be more difficult.

Task variety

Organisations and managers need to appreciate that there are a range of tasks that need to be undertaken in community centred work, that all require time and skills. Alongside building relationships, tasks may include: planning; contracting; workshop delivery; administering payments; report writing and more.

These need to be appropriately resourced, in a way that means that they are carried out safely and sensitively, as well as not creating excessive and competing demands on those involved.

Delivery support

Holding a safe and supportive space for everyone is key to delivering wellbeing support. This may well depend on the nature of the work you are planning, and working with different community groups may bring different responses and material into this space. Having more than a single facilitator is advised, as it means that where a participant may, for example, find a particular aspect of the workshop difficult, both the individual and the group can be supported to continue. The positive impact of this is felt by everyone, not just the participants: it decreases the load and the anxiety of conflicting demands for facilitators.

Time to rest

The impact of emotionally-laden work for those managing or facilitating community centred work is often overlooked. Everyone we consulted for this guidance emphasised how critical it is to build in time after sessions or meetings to decompress, rather than moving directly onto another task. This was important in scheduling different activities, to ensure there was appropriate downtime between them and that individuals were not expected to rest or recover on their own time.

Time to reflect

Practitioners also spoke about how important it is to have ways for everyone to share their experiences, the challenges they faced and any learning with other staff and participants as work progresses, not only at the endpoint. They value both formal and informal opportunities to share, reflect and support one another, for example suggesting a planned monthly session to discuss learning and impact.

These considerations will most likely have a resource requirement, financial or otherwise, and so taking time to think deeply about this and including the associated budget is critical.

Before the work starts

03



“One of the key issues is underestimating the impact on the workforce and the group, as well as the resources, expectations and expertise required.”

Tamsin Greaves

Managing expectations

A consistent theme from stakeholders was that participation was often unpredictable and that managing the expectations of senior managers often around small numbers was key. A focus on high numbers, ‘bean counting’ as one stakeholder described it, does not consider the significant and deep impact that participation can have on a single participant, and this should never be underestimated.

“Success can be individual change.”

Victoria Ryves

As part of managing expectations, it is important to ensure that fluctuating numbers and potential lower participation does not have a demotivating effect on session facilitators or the wider team. This is often the nature of the work, and so it is important to acknowledge this and be supportive.

It was highlighted that line manager and peer support is critical, but also having clear commitments from the organisation for this work was essential in raising the profile internally and externally, making resources and budget available and embedding as part of core delivery.

“One of things that we have had is incredible support by senior managers for what we do.”

Nelson Cummings

Training

From our [2022 Workforce Wellbeing research](#) we know that of those working with communities, only 29% had had training to support their work, with 39% stating they had had no training in the skills associated with effective work in this space.

Training can develop both competence and confidence, which decreases the potential anxiety of working in new or uncertain settings. The nature and level of the training depends on the work you are planning, and can include training around reflective practice, mental health first aid, risk assessment, or safeguarding. This is expanded within the Skills section below.

One of the key points highlighted by practitioners was that training is sometimes made available as a response to something that has not gone well. Being thorough in your scoping can ensure you develop a budget and workplan that anticipates training and development needs. Speaking with organisations that have undertaken similar work will help you appreciate the breadth of training options.

Depending on the organisation you are working with or for, you may be able to access service or authority wide training externally. For example, where there is local authority priority for action, such as domestic abuse, organisations like [Women’s Aid](#) can develop confidence. There are lots of free resources, for example the [Zero Suicide Alliance](#) offers a free online course on suicide awareness.

It may not be feasible for all team members to attend training, so you may want to adopt a train the trainer approach, where individuals are trained to run sessions for the team. Equally another way to cascade learning is through a skills share approach, where individuals who have attended then share their insights, skills and materials with others. This could be delivered as a ‘lightning’ talk for 10 minutes at a team meeting.

Skills

The following range of skills are important to consider:

- Advocacy
- Boundary setting
- Coaching and mentoring
- Co-curation and co-production
- Communication
- Conflict resolution
- Inclusion
- Project and time management
- Reflection, learning and self-awareness
- Trauma informed or consciousness practice.

Where existing staff take on a new project or programme, you should identify the skills they already have, any training they have undertaken previously, and whether there is a need for updated or refresher training. If employing a new role for the project, clarity about the skills required will help you write a role description, design a selection process and develop an induction and training programme. This also needs to be appreciated within the context of workforce turnover, so when new people join during the duration of a planned piece of work, they need to receive equivalent development support.

Wider team and roles

Think also about the wider team that may be involved in and affected by your work. This could include those working with collections information or dealing with social media or press enquiries. People we consulted highlighted the potential for awareness training in issues relevant to your work, as well as creating a space for discussion, support and recovery. Taking a holistic organisation-wide approach means that everyone involved in the project has their wellbeing supported.

An area that was specifically highlighted was raising awareness for front of house staff. For many communities, the museum will not be a familiar environment. It may not feel safe or known and as such, creating a friendly and supportive welcome, pathway and wayfinding is critical. This can help communities to feel welcome and ready to participate, so ensuring all visitor facing colleagues feel supported and equipped to welcome and respond to communities and the work you are doing is key.

The nature of the work may affect the likelihood of pushbacks, negative, hostile, or aggressive comments. This can come from both within the organisation and outside. Helping individuals deal with these situations, especially those on the front line is critical. This resource – [Managing a Hate Situation](#) was developed in direct response to a real situation relating to transphobic comments made about a community exhibition, although the principles can be applied more broadly.

Risk assessments

Museums are used to undertaking risk assessments for trips, slips and falls, for object moves or exhibition installation. However, it is becoming increasingly important to undertake them for other less tangible aspects of work, including psychological wellbeing or mental health. Undertaking an overarching risk assessment at the scoping stage can allow you to budget for and put in place appropriate mitigations to create a safe and supportive environment. In addition to an overarching risk assessment, you may want to include individual risk assessments for members of the team or participants to ensure they are supported. Remember that things may change over the course of the work and risk assessments may have to be repeated. Building in the concept of risk assessments may also increase the confidence of those having to undertake dynamic risk assessments.

Where there is a need to explore an individual’s lived experience more deeply or their likely response to content, a more structured [risk assessment](#) may enhance any reflections gained by completing an [individual wellbeing plan](#). Grounded in the Health and Safety Executive’s guidance on the management of stress - this risk assessment provides a more granular foundation for conversations and support.

Not a therapeutic space

It is critical to acknowledge the limitations of our abilities and the nature and aim of the work you are undertaking. Most museums do not include clinical and therapeutic spaces, and it is critical that participants and those involved appreciate this and have appropriate information to signpost or escalate as required.

Whilst many organisations are using the term ‘trauma informed practice’, Jess Turtle, Co-founder of Museum of Homelessness highlighted that they have adopted the term ‘trauma consciousness’, to highlight the limits of their expertise, and to ensure that the work they do is seen in this light.

It is important to reflect on the community you will be working with, the aim of the work and the depth of the emotional work. Different communities will have different needs and preferences and as such a specific and bespoke approach should be developed in partnership with them.

“I am not a therapist, and this is not therapy.”

Tamsin Greaves

“Clarity of target audience is critical - who is it you are working with and what do they need. This needs to be reflected in the design and marketing of your project.”

Victoria Ryves

Being clear of the purpose of the work and the individuals that participants will meet is critical.

Freelancers

In addition to the wider workforce, it is critical that the development, training and wellbeing of any freelancers involved is also prioritised. The care and attention provided for staff and volunteers should be extended to freelancers wherever possible. It is important to consider that they may have fewer opportunities for connection and support as a function of lone working. Providing and paying for freelancers’ time to access required training, post session debriefs, or rest, should be included in budgets.

During the funded work

04



Glynn Vivian Art Gallery, Swansea

Support and care

As your funded work progresses, revisit the plans you made and be ready to make adjustments. By building in the protective elements below, you can ensure that the wellbeing of all involved is prioritised and supported. This includes:

Task variety

Resourcing appropriately or developing individuals so they are able to undertake the range of tasks required competently and confidently.

Time to rest and reflect

Creating a work plan or rota to enable individuals to decompress or step back to protect their wellbeing. This should include time for individuals as well as scheduled discussions to reflect on the impacts of emotionally laden work.

Delivery support

Ensuring appropriate expertise and experience is available to support responsible delivery. This could be individuals from agencies or other organisations, so that there are not excessive demands that could compromise the wellbeing of all involved in the project.

Existing organisational support

As part of any preparation for induction for new staff, freelancers or volunteers, as well as raising the profile of support for existing staff, it can be helpful to collate all the relevant policies and procedures and create a list. These could relate to respect and dignity, inclusion, safeguarding, wellbeing, as well as access to Employee Assistance Programmes (EAP), Occupational Health, Trade Union representatives, Mental Health First Aiders.

If you work for a museum within a larger organisation or local authority you may have additional access to wider support that is already in place for higher risk professions, for example healthcare or social work professionals.

Line manager support

One of the most consistent themes around support was about having conversations, such as one-to-ones between managers and staff, peer conversations and group discussions. The power of sharing, being heard and knowing you are not alone is significant. Within the MA Wellbeing Hub, we have highlighted how you can have an [empathic and supportive conversation](#).

As part of this, acknowledging the heavy nature of the work and content, and reminding everyone that their responses are real and valid, without judgement is important.

If, as recommended, [individual wellbeing plans](#) were prepared before beginning the work, these can be used to monitor wellbeing levels and can help identify areas where support is needed.

Peer support

Building in support from peers can be extremely helpful whether that be funder networking events or joining a professional network like [GLAM Cares](#). Having a space to come and discuss challenges, enquire about solutions and approaches cannot be underestimated.

“We found that support for this work worked better in person so we adopted a hybrid approach to our meetings - which made it easier to check in on people.”

Nelson Cummins

“What worked well was a cup of tea and a debrief, as well as touch points with a line manager.”

Victoria Ryves

Self-care

Organisations have a duty of care to create safe and supportive spaces. It has been highlighted as something to think about before the project starts but should also be referenced throughout the project delivery. It can be helpful for organisations and managers to highlight points of care outside of the working situation, one of which is self-care.

Self-care is the practice of taking an active role in protecting one’s own wellbeing and happiness during periods of stress.

Having a sense of power or control in the way we live our lives has a protective and restorative positive impact. While resilience should not be worn as a ‘badge of honour’ or be expected as a default state there are things that individuals can put in place to develop their resilience. This [Building resilience resource](#) on the MA Wellbeing Hub may be able to help.

Identifying potential stressors, symptoms and protective and responsive ways to support your own wellbeing ensures that everyone is working together to create a culture of care.

Being prepared for the unexpected

Many of the points included in this guidance will create a solid foundation for dealing with the unexpected. If those involved feel supported, competent and confident, then their ability to respond to unexpected situations or reactions to content is more readily and expertly applied.

The nature of the work will affect the depth and type of emotional engagement. While you may have a sense of triggering content or collections, it is not always possible to predict the way in which a participant will respond. Something innocuous to you, may be triggering to someone else - it could be about the building, a noise as much as it could be about the content. While highlighting the potential triggering nature of content, staff, freelancers and volunteers should be prepared that this may not be the only content that creates an emotional response.

Even with detailed risk assessments you will not always be able to predict what could be triggers, or what could be affecting some one’s experience in the moment.

Signposting

As part of the support for everyone involved in the work, and specifically for participants, creating a list of national or local support organisations can be invaluable. This increases the confidence of those supporting them. Having them printed as well as in online resources such as participant applications or joining instructions, will mean they can be easily distributed.

Burnout

Following the reflections in this guidance can minimise the impacts on the wellbeing of all those involved. However, this may not be enough. Burnout describes the experiences of those who are subject to severe stress associated with their work. We hope that you will not have to use our resource for [handling burnout](#), however it may be helpful to review the content and signpost to ensure people are supported and aware of the symptoms.

Closing

05



Glynn Vivian Art Gallery, Swansea

Preparation

The nature and duration of the work will influence the strengths of relationships built.

As part of the work or project plan it is critical that you put in place time, space and resources to respectively manage the closing stages sensitively and effectively. Where applicable, ensure that participants are supported or have access to signposted resources, individuals and networks, for a time afterwards.

Just because a phase of work has ended does not mean the relationships or reflections have. Boundary training is important for this stage, as the relationships that have been built over time may be hard to step back from. Team members and facilitators may still want to support participants beyond the end of the work. However, doing this outside of established boundaries and support can be high risk for everyone involved.

Underestimating the need for support after work has been completed is a risk. Addressing this could be as simple as ensuring that funding allows time for wrap up, debrief and lessons learned, as well as having access to Employee Assistance Programmes slightly beyond the end of contracts.

The time and thought invested helps everyone prepare for the end phase of work sensitively and practically and may contribute to longer-term and established relationships between the museum and community groups.

Lessons learned

As part of the end of this work, it is important to find time for reflection, from all those involved – what worked? What did not? And how the experiences can be enhanced in the future. Having these conversations and sharing appropriate details within your organisation and more widely can ensure that all future work in this area meets the needs of everyone involved, centring and prioritising their wellbeing.

Acknowledgements

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Thank you to the following people who have been involved in the discussions about their work and good practice:

- Esther Amis-Hughes, Community Engagement Manager, Leeds Museums and Galleries
- Jess Turtle, Co-Founder and Director, Museum of Homelessness
- Kate Freeborough, Artist and Facilitator
- Nelson Cummins, Curator (Legacies of Slavery and Empire) Glasgow Museums
- Dr Nuala Morse, Lecturer in Museum Studies, University of Leicester
- Tamsin Greaves, Community Project Coordinator, Mansfield Museum
- Victoria Ryves, Heda of Culture and Engagement, Wentworth Woodhouse

Further resources

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There are a range of resources available that support this area of practice. Rather than re-writing them we wanted to signpost them as they may be more relevant for some projects than others.

[Museums Association’s Wellbeing Hub](#) – provides a range of resources that can be used in advance of and throughout the project, from individual risk assessments to individual wellbeing plans.

[GLAM Cares](#) – is a care and support network for people who work with communities in galleries, libraries, archives and museums. They provide a free events programme, an annual conference and training around these areas of practice. Their website has information, case studies and other resources to support work in this space.

[Culture, Health and Wellbeing Alliance](#) – provides networked, collaborative advocacy, support and resources, supporting health and wellbeing for all through creative and cultural practice.

Both GLAM Cares and Culture Health and Wellbeing Alliance are free to join professional networks.

[Manchester Art Gallery](#) - Manchester Art Gallery believes it is important for museums and galleries to adopt a trauma-informed approach in all the work they do. Their website has useful case studies and reflections.

[Communicating Decolonisation](#) – as a tool to manage wellbeing in the context of undertaking proactive communications.

[The Baring Foundation](#) – has written around what a trauma-informed museum looks like.

[How to write a positionality statement](#) – from the Equality Institute.

Case studies

08



Thackray Museum of Medicine

From the people we talked to, as well as examples of work in the sector there were clear priorities and steps to create a work and a space that supports and centres the wellbeing of others. Outlined below are some examples of the types of work being undertaken in this area and what we can learn from them.

Case study 01:
Heritage Doncaster – Peer Support Framework

In 2023, Heritage Doncaster set out to establish a framework for peer support for their community engagement staff. The team deliver wellbeing activities as part of the History, Health and Happiness programme. The programme uses museum collections and stories to improve wellbeing, form connections and build skills, through social clubs, workshops and creative activities; with varied audiences, including those who may be feeling isolated and those experiencing poor mental health.

The team enlisted the support of Vicky Richardson of Bread and Roses Counselling and GLAM Cares, a peer support network for those working in community engagement, to investigate what a framework for peer support for staff could look like. The intention was to ensure the same level of care awarded to participants was extended to staff, forming a culture of care.

Everyone explored what a peer support session could look like, a variety of existing reflective practice and sharing models, identifying the parts that worked best for them as a team.

Every six weeks, a closed in-person meeting is held with the team where staff can bring scenarios, questions and discussion points, using this framework. Through the framework’s assigned roles, which alternate each meeting, no one person is ever the expert and they all problem solve together in a non-hierarchical way, fostering the ability to share knowledge, best practice and learn from each other.

The best legacy is that this framework has enabled a focus on staff wellbeing to become standard practice, and they are looking at ways to roll this out to other Heritage Doncaster teams.

Case study 02:
Glasgow Museums - Art for Baby

Art for Baby is a free programme of hour-long weekly sessions delivered by the learning team at Gallery of Modern Art (GoMA), Glasgow Museums. It is aimed at caregivers with babies up to 18 months, harnessing the power of visiting museums, engaging with collections and creativity to tackle isolation and support mental wellbeing.

At the start of each session, participants are invited to make themselves comfortable in the GoMA Studio space, equipped with comfy seats, cushions, soft mats, sensory toys; and making them aware they can feed or change their baby at any point. The facilitator leads them through an informal visit, babies in arms, where they give a quick introduction to an exhibition and some prompts for participants to explore on their own. The group then heads back to the Studio, where they can play with their babies, chat with other parents and, if they want, make a simple art project inspired by the exhibition, often involving the baby in some easy ways.

The impact is demonstrated by the regularly fully booked workshops, waiting lists and overwhelming positive feedback and the team are now bringing this programme to other Glasgow Museums venues.

Case study 03:
University of Exeter – Researcher’s Wellbeing Through Art

The “Researcher’s Wellbeing Through Art” (RWTa) project was dedicated to improving the mental health and social support of PhD students through creative expression. The idea for this project came from a PhD student grappling with the dual challenges of academic stress and social isolation, intensified by her status as a neurodivergent international student. She observed similar issues among other neurodivergent students, especially people from ethnic minority backgrounds, who often felt hesitant to disclose their disabilities due to the pressure to conform within academic and social settings. This prolonged, unsupported experience is echoed among other PhD students, particularly those with caregiving roles, chronic health conditions, or severe mental health diagnoses. RWTa aimed to break this cycle, offering a creative outlet where PhD students can find connection, expression, and a supportive community.

The programme was designed with inclusivity and accessibility in mind. Workshop leaders were selected from local artists, with a particular focus on individuals who are single parents or neurodivergent. This choice fostered a community-oriented approach, as did the decision to primarily host events in community venues.

Central to RWTa are the four structured art workshops, periods for individual creative practice, and a final exhibition enabled participants to present their creations. The workshops created a welcoming environment where participants could step away from screens, relax, and immerse themselves in tactile creativity. Engaging with different materials helped them open-up about shared challenges like imposter syndrome, time management, and supervisor relationships. This provided far-reaching benefits to its participants by creating a supportive community that values their unique contributions.

Case study 04:
Mansfield Museum – Art Power

Art Power is a social justice project at Mansfield’s local authority museum, initiated in response to the increased volume of calls to domestic and sexual abuse support services post-covid.

With the aim of improving wellbeing and building social and cultural capital for marginalised women, the starting point was contact with local service providers to build relationships and encourage referrals.

The team set up five groups, each meeting every two to three weeks and used the museum’s collection of social history which includes ceramics, paintings, jewellery and taxidermy to inspire creative activity, curiosity and develop sense of place. They removed as many barriers as possible, the project was free, the art materials, travel, childcare and refreshments all taken care of, which enabled the women to come for themselves, with no outgoings, and they used Monday opening (when the museum is closed to the public), and orientation visits to ease that first step through the door.

Mansfield employed a range of freelance artists with skills such as printing, felt making, collage and stitch as well as an art therapist. The emotional load of both the museum facilitators and artists is acknowledged, and regular check-ins acted as informal supervision.

The combination of making art and making friends created a synergy of recovery and, even, post-traumatic growth, and the Annual Art Power exhibitions celebrated the creative outcomes with work in ceramics, stitch, printing, ink and felt. Mansfield Museum, via the Art Power project, has welcomed and empowered a new group of female artists.

