

# Health and Wellbeing in Museums Fund: Reflections & lessons learned from round one

## Introduction

The Museums Association launched the new Health and Wellbeing in Museums Programme in 2025, with funding from the Julia Rausing Trust. The programme consists of grant-making to support groundbreaking health and wellbeing programming in UK museums, alongside networking and learning dissemination opportunities for grantees.

In recognition of increasing financial challenge and demand for services for museums, we have chosen to award grants to continue and build on existing museum programmes which demonstrate excellence and sector-leading qualities. By enabling the development of existing work, rather than encouraging new initiatives, we see an opportunity for museums to enhance and embed evidenced practice, maximise impact, and increase resilience and futureproofing. We also hope to build a body of evidence for what best-practice looks like in the area of health and wellbeing in museums, with learning to be disseminated throughout the life of programme for the benefit of the whole sector. This evidence will also contribute towards other areas of work within the MA, including our advocacy for increased support and recognition for [UK museums](#).

This paper reflects on the process from 2025 and our experience so far, to inform the second funding cycle in 2026. It takes into consideration our own experiences and observations, feedback received from applicants and grantees, and any data and evidence collected.

## The application process

2025 timeline:

- **28 April 2025:** application process opened
- **26 June 2025:** application deadline for those invited to apply
- **10 September 2025:** selection panel met to agree grants to be awarded
- **September/October 2025:** applicants advised of the outcome

The application process has been designed to ensure that only those with a real potential to be funded were asked to complete an application form. The three stages to the process are as follows:

1. Potential applicants must complete a brief online quiz to check eligibility.
2. Those who successfully complete this will be able to book a conversation with our team to talk through their idea. During this conversation we guide and assess ideas further.
3. Those who meet all the essential criteria and some of the criteria for success (see selection criteria below) are invited to complete an application form.

The online eligibility test asks potential applicants to confirm that the institution from which they wish to apply:

- is an institutional member of the Museums Association
- is Formally Accredited, Formally Working towards Accreditation, or able to make a strong case for why they are not Accredited but can demonstrate equivalent standards
- has existing health and wellbeing work on which their proposed application would build
- can provide evidence of an organisational culture of care which acts to support and protect the wellbeing of staff, volunteers, freelancers, partners and participants.

Eligible candidates were invited to book a 30-minute application call with the programme's project officer during which their ideas were further assessed for suitability alongside tailored coaching and guidance. Those deemed to have a strong chance of success were invited to apply and sent an application form with continued support available up until the deadline. Applicants were able to request between £50-75k over a period of around 2 years and up to a maximum of 36 months.

Final funding decisions were made by a panel of experts with experience in health and wellbeing, museum practice and grant-making. The Health and Wellbeing in Museums Fund panel is made up of:

- Georgina Young, chairperson and MA board member
- Anne Dodwell, representing the Julia Rausing Trust
- Sally Colvin, representing the Museums Association
- Lynn Podmore, an independent museum health and wellbeing representative
- Amisha Karia, an independent museum health and wellbeing representative

## Interest and Demand

The eligibility quiz received a total of 250 responses from 199 individual respondents. From this total number, 102 museums and galleries from throughout the UK met the baseline eligibility criteria for the fund and went on to express interest in applying to support their health and wellbeing related work. This gives a good indication that health and wellbeing is an active priority for the sector, underpinning learning and engagement initiatives, outreach, partnerships, core programming, and strategic planning.

This resulted in 42 invitations-to-apply being issued – 12 more than initially proposed in the programme design due to the higher-than-expected demand and the high standard of proposals put forward. 39 applications were received. From these, 9 grants to the value of £653,828 were awarded.

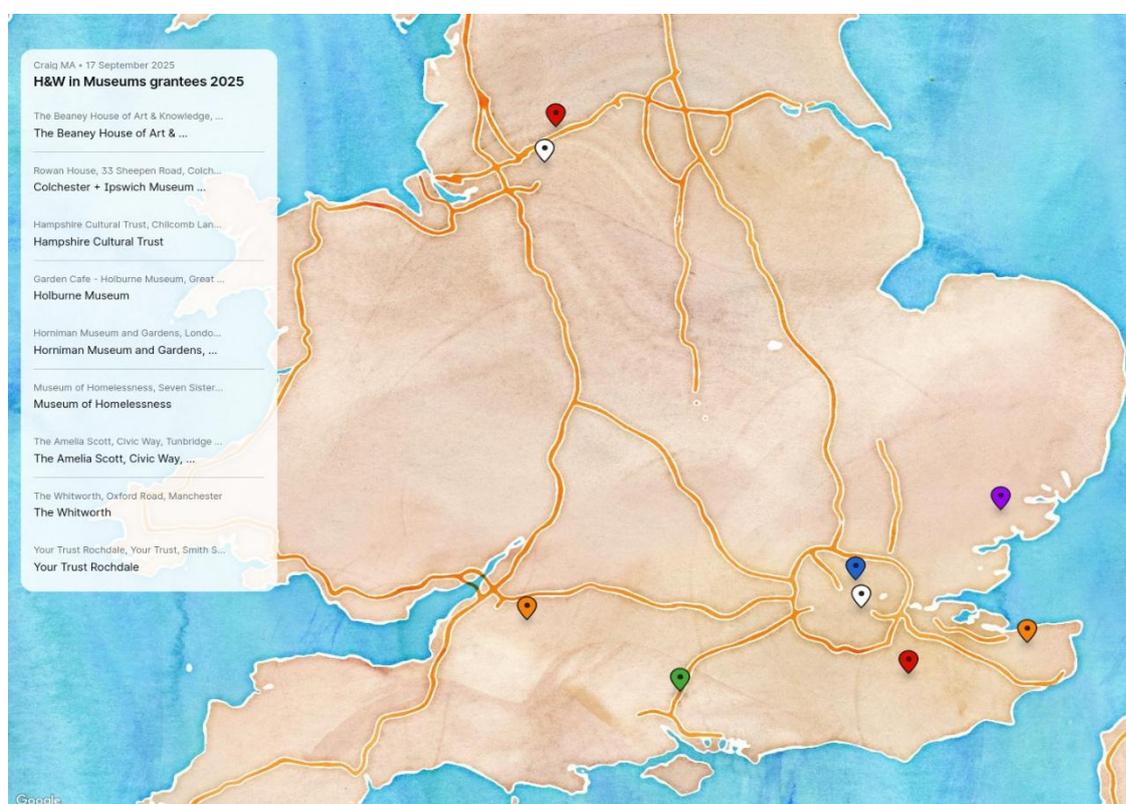


Figure 1: Map of Health and Wellbeing in Museums Fund 2025 grantees

## Reflections and analysis

Applications in 2025 showed that demand for support for health and wellbeing work in museums far exceeds this programme's capacity. Where appropriate, the MA signposted unsuccessful applicants towards other opportunities available at the time, including our [Esmée Fairbairn Communities and Collections Fund](#), the [Anti-racist Museum programme](#), or other sector funding such as the [Creative Minds Fund](#) from Museums Galleries Scotland,

meaning some may go on to be funded or supported elsewhere. The next round of Health and Wellbeing funding in 2026 will also welcome repeat enquiries where applicants can demonstrate how they have addressed any feedback they received.

The quality of applications received was exceptional overall and the selection panel had to make some very difficult decisions. Ultimately, decisions were based on the Criteria for Success, meaning they evidenced merit across:

- How well they demonstrated a need or demand for the work, drawing on evidence from their research, partnerships and evaluations.
- The coherence of their plans to develop and embed the work in terms of impact on participants, partners, their organisation and the wider sector.
- How their organisation will create a culture of care, protecting the wellbeing of staff, volunteers, freelancers, partners and participants.
- How they plan to manage the end of the funding period and the strength of the legacy the funding will enable them to build.
- The feasibility of their work within their timescales and budget.

Successful applicants, shown in Figure 1 above, all have a very localised or specific audience focus, and they all made a strong evidenced case for the need and demand for the work. Additionally, they were able to show how their work would be developed, embedded, and shared with the sector; how a culture of care would be maintained or created around their programme of work and beyond; the overall feasibility of the planned work; and how the end of the funded period would be managed with an emphasis on a strong, yet achievable, legacy.

Feedback from applicants on their experience indicates that our application process was well received. It worked to reduce the time museum staff had to dedicate to the earlier stages of the process and offered tailored advice and guidance on their ideas. From the Museums Association's perspective, this process provided an early filter for those who did not meet the baseline criteria, allowing for more time to support potential applicants.

1-1 calls were successful in their goals of a) prioritising proposals with the most potential, so that applicants avoid spending time on work with a low chance of success; and b) supporting those invited to apply to make the most of their ideas for the best chance of success. This aligns with the Fund's aim to support an already strained and under-resourced sector. Additionally, we were able to offer the majority of unsuccessful candidates across all stages of the application process bespoke feedback on their idea, either verbally during calls, or in follow up email communications. All indications are that this was helpful, and we hope will prove useful for future fundraising efforts.

*“That’s incredibly useful feedback below, thanks for taking the time to share it - it will help us evolve our community residency programme.”*

2025 Health and Wellbeing in Museums Fund applicant

*“Thanks for this helpful and detailed feedback and for encouraging us to keep talking to you and the team should we have the capacity to apply again in 2026. We really appreciate you taking this time and wish you and the team well.”*

2025 Health and Wellbeing in Museums Fund applicant

We also followed up with several applicants following the application submission deadline to gather additional information or details that we felt would enhance their application and aid the selection panel in making their decision. Efforts such as these go some way towards levelling the playing field amongst applicants who all have varying capacity, skill and experience in fundraising.

Due to the overwhelming interest in the fund, 1-1 call slots booked up quickly. Additional capacity was added wherever we were able to, but some potential-applicants were still unable to book in. This resulted in us providing an alternative means by which people could demonstrate the suitability of their proposed work in the form of a written submission. This method asked for a one-page summary of the proposed work, taking into consideration each of the essential criteria and criteria for success. While we were therefore able to hear from more museums wishing to apply, this disparity potentially left some people feeling at a disadvantage.

It is also worth noting some of the common themes and participant groups which came out during the application calls and final applications. These included (in no particular order): People with dementia and their families; social isolation and loneliness; support for victims of domestic violence; neurodivergence support; social prescribing; supporting local mental health services; services for young people; art therapy; climate anxiety; better representing regional demographics; trauma informed practice staff training; building confidence and capacity within museum teams; and embedding structural and strategic change.

We are paying close attention to the societal issues our funded projects address, particularly where they relate to social and climate justice. This fund provides an opportunity to align with wider MA priorities while supporting work with

underrepresented groups. In future rounds, we aim to foreground justice and equity based approaches even further, building evidence for how museums can best meet the health and wellbeing needs of people most affected by societal inequalities and equity-based approaches even further, building evidence for how museums can best meet the health and wellbeing needs of people most affected by societal inequalities.

### **Changes to the Fund in 2026**

For the next round in 2026, we have extended the timeframe in which museums will be able to book an application call by over 60% from 2025 and thus have also increased the total number of call slots available. We will also be able to offer more flexibility in how people can receive support and guidance in order to better meet different preferences and access requirements, such as allowing written expressions of interest at any point if that is preferred.

Our invite-only process left some applicants with only days between receiving their application form and the submission deadline. Applicants will all be given a minimum two-week period in which to complete their application from the point of being invited to apply, alleviating stress on those booking in closer to the deadline. We urge applicants to make the most of the additional time in which to book an application call and book in early.

For those invited to apply, the application form has been designed to be as straightforward as possible while still collecting the important narrative and supporting evidence needed by the decision panel for making informed decisions. However, we recognise that some museums, such as smaller or volunteer run museums, may disproportionately feel the pressure of completing any application, as well as the disappointment that comes with being unsuccessful. While we cannot remove all the pressures and risks that come with competitive funding territory, we are committed to providing additional support to those who might benefit the most and encourage anyone interested in applying to outline any additional support they would like at the earliest opportunity.

We continue to work hard to attract and support applicants from throughout the UK, and over the two rounds of the programme we aim to create a diverse and representative portfolio of funded projects. While achieving a geographic spread has not been an explicit remit of this fund, it is important to us that our funding reaches museums of all types and size in different nations and regions of the UK. Therefore, we actively encourage applications from museums who don't see anything like them in our grantees so far and especially from Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales, in line with our [Nations Policy](#). We encourage feedback from applicants on their experience to aid with this process.