

# **Exploring Wellbeing – experiences of museum professionals of colour**

## **Research Executive Summary**

**October 2024**

The Museums Association (MA) is a long-standing advocate for everyone who works in and with museums. The MA is committed to supporting museums in creating environments where all professionals, including freelancers and volunteers, can thrive.

In 2022, the MA conducted sector-wide research to identify the current state of individual wellbeing in the workforce, identify factors affecting wellbeing at individual, organisational, and sector level. The research pinpointed actions to drive positive change for everyone who works in and with museums; revealed a critical need for ongoing, nuanced discussions about wellbeing; and informed the launch of a Wellbeing campaign in 2023. The campaign focuses on organisational responsibility for workforce wellbeing and aims to collaborate with museums to raise awareness, showcase good practice, and implement effective wellbeing programmes for both their workforce and the communities they serve.

We recognise that work such as community engagement, commitment to decolonisation and anti-racist practices within museums are essential. However, these priorities, combined with societal factors, can often contribute to a hostile and challenging environment for professionals of colour in the sector.

We also recognise that museum professionals of colour were underrepresented in our research. To address this we convened two Discovery Discussion sessions in June and July 2024 to provide a platform for professionals of colour to deeply explore and reflect on their individual and collective experiences. The goal was to gain a greater understanding of specific issues and contexts, and to assess what these mean for the sector and how the MA can effectively support the individuals concerned.

This report outlines the insights gained from the Discovery Discussions and offers recommendations to enhance the MA's ongoing Wellbeing campaign to create inclusive and diverse museums that prioritise fair working conditions and the wellbeing of the whole workforce.

## Key Findings

- A significant number of professionals of colour said they feel pressure to change their behaviour to fit in. They highlighted feeling isolated, excluded, anxious, uncomfortable and frustrated.
- There was consensus amongst participants that professionals of colour are continuously relied on, to answer questions about systemic issues, with many asked to do additional work related to diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI), or co-opted on to committees, or as champions without proper recognition about the sensitivity and triggering nature of the work, or compensation for the additional time spent engaging in these activities.
- Lack of cultural literacy, generalisation and misunderstanding about different groups is commonplace, leading to difficulties in interpersonal interactions and superficial initiatives that do not address deeper systemic issues.
- There was consensus amongst all participants about the lack of representation in the sector, including at leader and trustee level. Session participants highlighted the need to allocate board level responsibility for both wellbeing and race, requiring leaders to drive change forward and be held accountable for progress.
- Participants reiterated the value of flexible working policies, Employee Assistant Programmes, DEI and peer support groups and networks, mental health and wellbeing training and having access to Mental Health First Aiders, highlighting the positive impact these initiatives can have.
- The differences between the experiences of those employed by museums versus volunteers and freelancers were shared in terms of disconnection, lack of access and involvement with wellbeing initiatives or campaigns.
- Encouragingly, participants said that supportive line managers make them feel valued. They feel relatively comfortable talking about their wellbeing with their line managers, however, they attributed this to the person and not necessarily to the culture within their organisations or teams.

## **Conclusions and Recommendations**

Discovery Discussions led us to conclude that museum professionals of colour face a wider range of challenges at work that are negatively impacting their wellbeing and that organisations can impact their people and support positive wellbeing.

The MA recognises the museum sector's responsibility to foster diverse, inclusive, and mentally healthy environments. This includes recognising systems that perpetuate discrimination, interrupting that system by calling it out and then ensuring action to repair.

The MA recommends five strategic areas of action, with recommended practices to guide organisations to build workplaces that are psychologically safe and ensure that wellbeing support is appropriate, effective, and accessible to all, including freelancers and volunteers, and the communities they serve.

### **1. Foster a safe and inclusive environment**

Recommended Practices:

- Mental health initiatives: Embed mental health and wellbeing initiatives representative of museum professionals of colour, addressing the unique challenges they face.
- Senior leadership diversity: Increasing diversity in senior roles with targeted recruitment and mentorship opportunities for professionals of colour to ensure leadership is representative of the workforce.
- Leadership training on race and wellbeing: Providing regular training on race and wellbeing enhancing leaders' capacity to build a supportive and inclusive environment.
- Visible support from leadership: Senior leaders supporting race and wellbeing initiatives through role modelling, communication and personal stories. This sponsorship is essential in setting a top-down precedent for inclusivity.

### **2. Recognise and address barriers to inclusion**

Recommended Practices:

- Addressing structural barriers: Recognising how exclusion manifests—whether through lack of representation or access to opportunities, for example implementing a

zero-tolerance racism policy and preventing microaggressions is crucial to inclusion and anti-racism principles.

- Psychological safety and trauma-informed practices: Creating psychologically safe environments through trauma-informed approaches ensures so that professionals of colour feel secure and have safe spaces for discuss race and wellbeing.
- Cultural consideration: Upskilling everyone in cultural literacy and avoiding stereotypes promotes understanding and respect for all. This, alongside wellbeing resources, and anti-racism policies are crucial to dismantling systemic racism and discrimination.

### **3. Allocate leadership responsibility**

Recommended Practices:

- Board-level responsibility: Assigning responsibility for diversity and inclusion to board members, both internal and boards of trustees, reinforces leadership accountability.
- Leadership development: Leadership training on racism and wellbeing to equip leaders with the ability to implement strategic changes; creating clear pathways between senior leadership and the wider workforce, building understanding and driving cultural change.

### **4. Monitor and evaluate wellbeing initiatives**

Recommended Practices:

- Equality Impact Assessments (EIA): Conducting EIAs and external evaluations to measure diversity and wellbeing progress is essential. This ensures continuous improvement in creating inclusive spaces and drives long-term change.
- Regular data collection: Monitoring appointments, turnover, grievances, career pathways, consulting staff, and using surveys and focus groups to gather feedback ensures that wellbeing initiatives meet the needs of professionals of colour.

### **5. Sector-wide standards and initiatives**

Recommended Practices:

- Sector-wide benchmarks: Establishing benchmarks, public pledges, and shared resources to support diversity builds sector-wide accountability. Wellbeing Advocates and Champions can help drive cultural change across the sector.

- Allyship and support networks: Supporting networks such as Museum Detox and developing race equality advisory groups promotes collective responsibility, allyship and peer-led advocacy.
- Standardising pay and compensation: Standardising pay rates, compensation, and ensuring fair working conditions for the whole workforce including freelancers.

## **With thanks**

We extend our gratitude to the sector, all MA members and Discovery Discussion participants for their contributions to our Wellbeing campaign.

We extend future thanks for those that will read, reflect and implement the recommendations to address racism, exclusion and marginalisation within the sector, with the consequences of positive wellbeing and a positive experience of work.

And finally, we are thankful for the expertise of Jessica Agudelo (Wellbeing and Inclusion Expert), Discovery Discussions facilitator and report author.

*“The sector must ensure that workplaces create a culture where everyone feels a sense of belonging and is empowered to thrive.”*

Jessica Agudelo, Mental Health & Wellbeing Consultant