



Discovery Discussion Research Report

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1.0 Introduction

This report details the findings for the Museums Associations exploration into Wellbeing and Ableism¹.

Talila A. Lewis (2022) defines ableism as, 'a system of assigning value to people's bodies and minds based on societally constructed ideas of normalcy, productivity, desirability, intelligence, excellence, and fitness.'

The research was conducted in the form of two 2-hour long online Discovery Discussions.

To create a safe space where participants were able to share their experiences several considerations were made including:

- Not assuming everyone involved had experienced ableism directly,
- Not assuming how participants refer to themselves,
- Following the social model of disability,
- Sending the presentation and questions in advance,
- Not setting expectations around having to prepare anything,
- Providing different ways for participants to share (verbally, using the chat function, asking a facilitator to share on their behalf, email to Tamsin or not sharing in the session),
- Providing scheduled breaks,
- Being flexible to the needs of the group on the day,
- Questions added to the chat function as well as being asked verbally,

¹ Whilst the focus of this research was centred around the experience of disabled museum professionals, this will further be explored through an intersectional lens later in 2026-2027.

- Stating the ways access would be embedded into the session such as closed captions,
- Asking if there was anything else we could do to support participants to attend,
- Scheduling the session at a time that consider different needs such as medication and carer responsibilities,
- All participants were paid for participating in the Discovery Discussions.

The Discovery Discussions were divided into sections for exploration including:

- Lived experience,
- Leaders, managers, colleagues and the sector,
- Museums Association.

The Discovery Discussions were attended by 22 participants from across England, Scotland, and Wales. Participants involved shared experiences from across volunteering, employed roles and freelancing.

In both sessions, all participants were incredibly generous with their sharing and timings were adapted to make sure that everyone who wanted to share was able to do so.

After the session, all participants had the option of sharing anything additional by email as well as asking to withdraw anything they had already shared.

This report was shared with the participants to make sure they were happy with the content before publication.

Throughout this report the term 'we' is used to support anonymity and confidentiality of the Discovery Discussion participants. The 'we' does not include the views of the co-facilitators or the Museums Association.

The report uses the term individual which refers to employees, freelancers, and volunteers. It also includes the term participant to clearly anchor the views from the Discovery Discussions.

2.0 Lived Experience of Ableism

The first part of the exploration looked at participants lived experience of ableism. To support the conversation, the following questions were asked:

- From your experience of ableism, which was the most significant?
- What other negative experiences of ableism have you experienced?

It was made clear by participants throughout the Discovery Discussions that the sector does not practice what it preaches in terms of workforce wellbeing. In fact, participants highlighted that the sector is more focussed on the wellbeing and access support for customers and visitors.

The emotional toll that this was taking on both those experiencing ableism directly and their allies was very evident by the examples provided by participants.

There were several themes within the lived experiences shared by participants of where ableist practice has been experienced including:

- Bullying,
- Career Opportunities,
- Communication,
- Management,
- Reasonable Adjustments,
- Recruitment and Onboarding,
- Representation,
- Tokenistic Practices,
- Understanding and Training.

Below are some of the quotes which were generously shared by participants, a full list of the experiences shared is in Appendix 1.

- “My experience has been that structural ableism does present itself most when museums have come to working with you with the expectation that your lived experience can be extracted, but there's little impetus for those with the authority to actively change.”
- “Working with museums to create accessibility support resources while being subjected to ableist practices and treatment at work was challenging to deal with.”
- “Lack of understanding about having to pre-plan in advance when you have a disability; so changing times, locations at the last minute and not understanding how that might impact on being able to engage like everyone else.”
- “I was targeted as I was an easy scapegoat as I have a mental health condition.”
- “Having my disability questioned as I do not always use a mobility aid, to the extent someone who went for the same job as me submitted an FOI to my employer asking about the legitimacy of my disability and why I was given a job.”
- “When I got my first job, I was told how fantastic I was before I was being bullied.”
- “There was a lot of, kind of, invalidation, you know, there was things, you know, people commented, everybody's autistic nowadays, or we're all a little bit autistic kind of thing and even some people weren't even convinced autism was a real thing. They thought it was just a kind of a way of kind of feeling special or getting some kind of special treatment.”

- “I think the most significant experience was not taking reasonable adjustments into account and telling me it's unacceptable to ask for support.”
- “We are expected to act in positions of responsibility during fire evacuations without consideration of how disability or neurodiversity would be a barrier to this and a safety issue.”

The consequences of these experiences have lasting impacts on individuals mental and physical health, which can continue even after leaving a difficult role or organisation.

This highlights that the wellbeing of individuals as a result of experiencing ableism should be seen as a significant concern.

3.0 Reflections (Leaders, managers, colleagues, and the sector)

The second area of exploration was around what leaders, managers, colleagues, and the sector can do. To support the conversation the following questions were asked:

- Based on your lived experience what could they have done differently?
- What would you like to see leaders, managers or colleagues change specifically?
- Who else in the sector can help? What could they do?

One of the main reflections from both Discovery Discussions was the need to ensure there are processes in place to hold people using ableist practice accountable.

This is relevant for leaders, managers, colleagues, the sector, and the Museum Association.

As well as there being several key themes which are listed later in this section, there were general points given for the sector as a whole including:

- Ensure that ableist practice is challenged from the top down,
- Ensure that accessibility is at the top of the agenda when planning any events and support people with planning and getting there,
- Practice what you preach and actively encourage a diverse workforce,
- Respect different perspectives and experiences,
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- Review job descriptions to see whether all the criteria listed are needed to do a role or whether they are excluding potential,
- Treat people with empathy and as individuals.

Other reflections for leaders, managers, colleagues, and the sector covered several key themes including:

- Advocacy,
- Communication,
- Reasonable Adjustments,
- Training,
- Understanding.

3.1 Reflections – Advocacy:

- Accessibility needs to be embedded throughout a whole organisation and should not be the responsibility of one team or individual particularly as free emotional labour or in addition to a substantive role without additional pay for disabled staff members,
- Challenge the need for diagnosis to secure support to avoid creating situations where people are seen as their diagnosis rather than who they are as an individual,
- Continue to advocate for flexible working opportunities whilst also acknowledge that this won't be possible in every role such as those working in front facing roles,
- Having a supportive line manager, HR department, Trade Union, or a mentor within the organisation to vouch for a disabled person can make a difference in helping to advocate for specific support.

3.2 Reflections – Communication:

- Avoid treating us, disabled individuals like we are children and treating us in an infantilised way,
- Bring everyone together and share ideas, ensure that different perspectives can be shared,
- “Don’t talk about us behind our backs, include us in the conversation,”
- Ensure that communication is clear to support people to plan and organise,
- Have open conversations from the beginning about what is expected of us, how will our performance be measured, and the indicators being used to measure a task completed well,
- Offer information in other formats, for example hard copies as well as digitally, before or at the start of a meeting,
- Provide transparent expectations, clearly explain any nuances or unwritten rules within the workplace,
- Respect other people’s perspectives, make sure they are valued and keep communication open,
- Set reasonable expectations of support needed and offered making sure to keep honest communication between manager and individual,
- Stop stating that you are hiring disabled people to do us a favour, acknowledge that you are hiring us for the skillsets we can bring to the role.

3.3 Reflections – Reasonable Adjustments:

- Adjustments such as flexible working need to be applied equitably across all roles within the sector with options such as such as compressed hours, job shares, and term-time contracts,
- Ask us what support we need rather than making assumptions about the support that we may need,
- Don't question or dismiss the adjustments that have been requested,
- Follow the advice given from external agencies such as Occupational Health,
- Move beyond the law (such as Equality Act 2010²) towards a situation where adjustments are mutually agreed based on what is possible to put in place whilst leaving room for flexibility and understanding of fluctuating needs.

3.4 Reflections – Training:

- Ensure that all staff and volunteers are open to and receive training around disability/neurodivergence etc.,
- Ensure that any Equity, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) related training is all encompassing to cover a diverse range of lived experiences are included such as non-visible disabilities,
- To be truly effective training needs to be aimed at all levels but specifically senior leaders for anti-ableist practice to be modelled from the top down.

² The Equality Act 2010 does not apply in Northern Ireland, but similar legislation for protection and anti-discrimination exists.

3.5 Reflections - Understanding:

- Be understanding and patient and treat people without judgement,
- Challenge the ideas that people have about certain behaviours for example if someone needs to doodle or use a fidget in a meeting to aid concentration not viewing this as someone who isn't paying attention,
- Respect the confidential nature of what we share from our lived experience,
- Understand challenges that some selection criteria that are not actually essential to a role may cause such as driving, as not everyone is able to drive due to their disability but that doesn't mean we are not able to do the role,
- Understand some people will only be able to work if we have support funded through Access to Work and any changes to this may mean that we, disabled people will need to be employed differently.

4.0 Reflections about the Museums Association

The final area of exploration focussed on what the Museums Association could do and what participants would like to see the Museums Association doing as a professional body for those that work in and with museums. To support this conversation, the following questions were asked:

- What would you say to the Museums Association about their work around anti-ableism?
- What is the most important thing the Museums Association could do for the sector and the experiences of disabled museum professionals?
- Is there anything else you would like them to explore or develop?

The reflections shared were wide ranging although there was a common theme throughout that they need to be seen to be leading the way by creating frameworks and guidelines as well as modelling anti-ableist practices in their own work. These included:

- Advocate for funding criteria to include working with people with lived experience including panels, colleagues, and management teams,
- Consider if there is a way of quality controlling the EDI and related training that is being accessed by the sector,
- Continue to develop on the support that you offer at in person events such as quiet spaces to enable a diverse audience at these events, this approach will also model to the wider sector what needs to be done,

- Create a framework for managers to use when giving feedback ensuring that qualitative feedback is being given and conversations are supportive,
- Create or update Disability Recruitment guidelines,
- Dedicate an issue of the Museums Journal to Wellbeing and Ableism within the workforce,
- Develop the Code of Ethics more to include a larger focus on the workforce and wellbeing,
- Encourage more within the sector to speak out about ableism by offering support for those that are, perhaps by bringing people together online in some way such as a Museums Association Collective,
- Ensure that these conversations around wellbeing and ableism are not happening in isolation, instead using an intersectional approach,
- Have an awareness of what is going on within the sector and ensure that organisations are not given a platform if they are underperforming,
- Include within the Anti-Ableism campaign that the purpose of museums is so that everyone can have access to their culture and their histories, and this includes disabled people, so museums need to be inclusive, not just of different stories but also of diverse experiences and mindsets,
- Resources available with links to external organisations for what someone can do if they have been discriminated against,
- Salary Guidelines to be updated to reflect the low salaries within the sector versus the high cost of living for disabled people,

- Specific training for line managers who are neurodivergent themselves,
- Support for those within the sector who are speaking up and challenging ableism who face potential repercussions as well as the emotional toil speaking up creates,
- Take part in training along with other sector support organisations to support colleagues within the sector they are in contact with,
- Update the terms of the Museums Association Institutional Membership to include a commitment to diversity within the workforce,
- Use existing case studies of leaders within the sector who are already standing up and challenging perceptions of what it means to be a leader.

5.0 Other areas to consider

It was highlighted as part of the Discovery Discussions that this work sits within a broader context. This context includes ableist government policies as well as the impending changes to Access to Work. It has been documented in the media that multiple people have had cuts made to their Access to Work awards with the expectation that these cuts will become permanent policy in 2026.

Another scheme that was highlighted during these discussions was Disability Confident, in particular how the guidelines within recruitment for getting an automatic interview are not necessarily clear or being followed within the sector.

Overall, a key discussion point was that for there to be real change in ableism and its impacts on wellbeing, there needs to be a culture change, but this is slow to make and can be easily undone. However, the Discovery Discussion sharing has highlighted that museums are in a unique position to be able to influence this really needed change in society.

Appendix 1 – Lived Experience Examples

Bullying:

- Bullying from management or senior leaders is hard to take any action on and due to roles in museums being hard to come by there is a feeling that we should put up with the bullying and blame ourselves,
- Individuals experiencing bullying, having ableist language used towards us, physical aggressive behaviour, and gaslighting without accountability for those displaying that behaviour.

Career Opportunities:

- Being freelance is sometimes seen as the way to stop having to work with more ableist organisations after having negative experiences involving gaslighting and microaggressions from employers,
- Feeling of being stuck due to inaccessible options for career progression or fulfilment.

Communication:

- Being given unsolicited advice from people with little or no experience of a condition,
- Unclear expectations and information being given around targets for probationary periods, flexible working arrangements, and office politics.

Management:

- Colleagues 'spying' and feeding back to management including talking about colleagues behind their back,
- Emails being sent about someone without their knowledge asking previous museums where they had worked to vouch for the

individual with responses containing personal comments including that the individual needed 'help',

- Managers and HR questioning capability when aware of a diagnosis and on occasion not sharing those concerns with the individual,
- Managers keeping logs of 'mistakes' but not sharing actual feedback with an individual,
- Managers recommending seeking diagnosis without understanding what that process involves.

Reasonable Adjustments:

- Being upfront with managers about specific requirements and being assured this wouldn't be a problem before it ultimately being used against the individual or withdrawn,
- Disclosure of any kind including asking for reasonable adjustments or ticking the disabled box in an application feels like a risk including having access needs questioned and being used as a scapegoat leading to potential disciplinary processes,
- Having reasonable adjustments be implied to be 'special treatment',
- Having to fight for adjustments or not having them considered.
- Individual evacuation plans being developed without consultation and involvement.

Recruitment and Onboarding:

- Inaccessible and unclear recruitment processes particularly in relation to the Disability Confident Scheme,
- Job descriptions are often not aimed at those who have not followed a traditional learning path or have requirements that aren't needed for the role with transferable skills often missed including

the often essential criteria of a Museum Studies MA for roles which automatically restricts who is able to apply for those roles,

- Occupational Health Assessments and Pre-Health Check Assessments being used in unsupportive ways including challenging the capability of someone to do the job both before and after starting a role,
- Procedures such as raising a grievance or probationary periods being used against individuals or not being accessible including probationary periods being extended without any prior knowledge of any issues,
- Requirements for getting a role are not accessible to everyone such as short-term contracts, the expectation of long commutes or moving away from support networks and the need for volunteering.

Representation:

- Lack of representation in leadership roles with little progression opportunities for those in middle management,
- The museum sector has portrayed medical history as a curiosity.

Tokenistic Practices:

- Informing people we have only been hired to tick the diversity box,
- Lots of tokenistic practice with the focus often being on visitor access, including access audits for visitor facing access that don't consider ableist practices for staff.

Understanding and Training:

- Being offered training to support us in a role but NOT being given that training,

- Disabilities being viewed as the problem rather than using the social model of disability to look at the environment, behaviours and treatment of individuals as disabling,
- It is seen as appropriate to ask someone about their medical history with no regard to how that might make someone feel,
- Lack of understanding around being neurodivergent means including being infantilised when disclosing being autistic or having enthusiasm misinterpreted,
- Lack of understanding around different needs such as a fire alarm needing to be loud to 'get people going' but also how that loud sound can impact other people's nervous systems,
- Support in place, such as training, for those managing neurodivergent staff but nothing available for those who are neurodivergent themselves,
- The accessibility of locations plans and costs not being considered when planning events or training.

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