

Ableism and Wellbeing Research and Recommendations

Executive summary

October 2026

In 2022, the Museums Association (MA) conducted sector-wide research to identify the current state of individual wellbeing in the workforce, and to identify factors affecting wellbeing at individual, organisational and sector levels. The research pinpointed actions to drive positive change for everyone who works in and with museums and revealed a critical need for ongoing, nuanced discussions about wellbeing. As long-standing advocates for everyone who works in and with museums, the MA developed a [wellbeing campaign](#) focused on organisational responsibility for workforce wellbeing.

We recognised that disabled museum professionals were underrepresented in our research. To address this, we convened two discovery discussion sessions in March 2026 to provide a platform for disabled museum professionals to deeply explore and reflect on their individual and collective experiences. The goal was to gain a greater understanding of specific issues and contexts, to assess what these mean for the sector, and to identify how the MA can effectively support the individuals concerned.

This executive summary outlines topline insights and offers recommendations to enhance the MA's ongoing wellbeing campaign to create inclusive and diverse museums that prioritise fair treatment and inclusive practices.

Key findings

Our 2022 research into workforce wellbeing highlighted a range of factors that had a negative impact on wellbeing. The discovery discussions in 2026 and engagement with MA members confirm the five most significant factors for the whole workforce are still significant factors affecting the positive experience of work for disabled people. These are:

- Excessive demands
- Lack of recognition and being valued
- Poor pay
- Problematic organisational culture
- Lack of opportunities for progression

Participants highlighted often feeling isolated, excluded, uncomfortable and frustrated, and that their disability was diminished, questioned and treated as an inconvenience – until it wasn't, when they were asked to share lived experiences and access recommendations, acting as a 'community representative'.

Participants also highlighted additional impacts on freelance workers, such as being seen as outside of the workforce, little empathy associated with their experience of disability, and their experiences being amplified by poor freelancing practices.

In addition, the following factors were shared:

- Experiences of poor management and communication – leading to difficulties in interactions and understanding.
- Expectations of lived experience extraction – without recognition, remuneration or allocation of time.
- Inaccessible recruitment and onboarding processes, specifically around reasonable adjustments – leading to poor support provision and negative perceptions.
- Lack of understanding and empathy – with generalisations, assumptions and misunderstandings of different disabilities and their impact.
- Lack of progression and career opportunities – with roles based on previous postholders.
- Poor treatment, tokenistic practices and experiences of bullying – by line managers as well as peers.

Where there was good practice – for example, access to flexible or hybrid working – this was inconsistent and often as a result of an individual line manager's commitment.

Conclusions and recommendations

Discovery discussions led us to conclude that disabled museum professionals face a wide range of challenges at work that are negatively impacting their wellbeing. This can occur from the point of application to induction and beyond, acknowledging that disability is dynamic and impacts and needs may change over time.

The MA recommends action in four areas – sectoral, organisational, leadership and collegiate.

A fundamental shift is the adoption of the social model of disability, where people are disabled by barriers in society, not by their physical or mental impairments. This is in addition to the understanding of ableism as discrimination, prejudice or social bias against people with physical, intellectual or psychological disabilities. Anti-ableism is proactive: recognising abled privilege and actively looking to challenge and dismantle it through theory, actions and practices.

This includes recognising systems that perpetuate discrimination and oppression, interrupting that system by calling it out, and then ensuring action to dismantle and rebuild inclusively to foster diverse, inclusive and mentally healthy environments. This can be achieved by:

- adopting a zero-tolerance stance on ableist language or treatment
- centring the individual, following their lead, listening to and believing them
- adopting good accessibility practice both front of house and behind the scenes, for both our visitors and our workforce
- ensuring planning, fundraising and budget allocation results in adequate time and resources available
- reviewing all policies, processes and procedures, specifically those associated with the 'lifecycle' of an employee, for example recruitment and selection
- ensuring those with a duty of care have up to date skills and knowledge to create a culture where individuals feel comfortable sharing their experiences and identity
- working with others to effect change, for example disability support networks, access panels, allies or trade unions
- appreciating experiences outside of the workplace may affect an individual's response and performance within it
- challenging ableism and escalating, where appropriate.

By adopting these recommendations we will be able to lever change, build workplaces that are psychologically safe, and ensure that wellbeing support is appropriate, effective and accessible to all, including freelancers, volunteers and the communities we serve.

With thanks

We extend our gratitude to discovery discussion participants and all who contributed for their insights. We extend thanks to those that will read, reflect and implement the recommendations to address ableism with the aim of reducing exclusion and marginalisation, resulting in positive wellbeing and a positive experience of work. Finally, we are thankful for the expertise of Emily Elsworth (museum access consultant and inclusion expert), discovery discussion facilitator and research report author.