Safe Access: Promoting Wellbeing for Diverse Researchers

Project Aims

Safe Access: Promoting Wellbeing for Diverse Researchers aimed to better understand the representation burden and impact on wellbeing experienced by marginalised people who engage professionally with museums, heritage organisations, and their collections. The project has been led by Cornwall Museums Partnership (CMP) and Queer Kernow. Well placed to deliver this research, CMP are a team of museum and heritage sector experts working technically and strategically to support our local museums day-to-day, while looking at current and future needs and global trends to help inform and invigorate practice. CMP have extensive experience in delivering programmes of work that centre on the development of more inclusive and accessible practices within the museum sector. The delivery of this work was supported by the expertise and lived experience of Queer Kernow, a non-profit community organisation which exists to challenge intolerance through education and outreach, connecting Cornwall's current LGBTQ community with their past, and celebrating the rich, fascinating world of queer Cornish history.

Safe Access focussed on the experience of people working with museums and heritage organisations in Cornwall but its development and application is something we know to be of national relevance. The following document is the outcome of our first phase of research through which gathered rich qualitative

data by interviewing 8 people, mostly non-salaried professionals such as freelancers and artists. These interviewees represented the experience of people from marginalised communities including; queer, trans, disabled, neuro-diverse and Cornish ethnicity. The ultimate aim of gathering and analysing this data is to develop a richer understanding of the challenge to best inform the development of a framework or process which better protects individuals in the future.

Successes and Challenges

Successes

The personal nature of this research work opens the project up to various vulnerabilities and spaces for harm. The following approaches and processes provided a stable framework for the delivery team to effectively gather this data.

- There is a strong need for flexibility in any research work that engages marginalised and vulnerable communities. Flexibility in the working structure of the delivery team was a necessity for us to successfully conduct interviews. This included offering in-person and online interviews, varied locations across Cornwall for interviews to take place, re-scheduling interviews at short notice, working around the capacity and time limitations of interviewees and our project team.

- Truly valuing interviewee time and expertise. At their heart, interviews are an inherently extractive process of emotional labour. We had to think critically about how to purposefully counter the extractive nature of interviews to mitigate potential for negative wellbeing impacts on individuals involved with the research. This mitigation needs to be built into the project delivery budget to include generous remuneration for interviews, interviewee sustenance and travel expenses, wellbeing time and resources, and room hire for confidentiality.

- Embedding wellbeing as a value of the project. Wellbeing was put at the heart of decision making for the delivery team and interviewees alike. We built this into our delivery process by; asking interviewees for their specific requirements and expectations for their own wellbeing before booking an interview, offering sustenance and wellbeing packs to interviewees, and building specific time into the interview slots to allow space for wellbeing debriefs and breaks throughout.

- Accessibility of the interviews was fundamental to engaging with marginalised people. We used artificial intelligence to analyse and re-word the interview questions to be as clear as possible, questions were shared with interviewees beforehand, wellbeing breaks were built in as standard, all interviewees were asked for personal access needs, different interview options (online or in-person) were offered to everyone, and we created as much variation as possible for interview locations.

- Intersectionality of interviewees is imperative to developing a rich understanding of the impact that working with collections can have on marginalised people. We wanted to recognise the full breadth of interviewee's identities in our process and research. Following an intersectional

approach allows for the development of a broad interplay of experiences across various professional roles and organisations.

- A strong and trusting partnership between Cornwall Museums Partnership and Queer Kernow has further developed throughout this project. This made our work more authentic as we had a solid foundation of mutual trust and empathy which supported us throughout.

Challenges

- To do this work we have to exist and operate within the damaging and restrictive structures that exist at a systemic level. This limits the authenticity and effectiveness of the research as it perpetuates the damage done by having vague and homogenous language/ categories.

- Despite having a statistically more diverse team than usually found in the sector, we were still unable to fully match the experiences and identities of the people we aimed to interview, and this may have had a limiting effect on the content and experiences interviewees were willing to disclose.

- We reflected on the limitations of the interviews and why we were unable to connect with certain people, there were various interlocking reasons for this, including; constraints of capacity of marginalised people giving their time to a project with the potential to be emotionally triggering, the rural disparity and lack of public transport in Cornwall was a factor in some cases for potential interviewees and the time constraints of the project meant that we had a limited time to complete the interview section. The team decided responded to these challenges with a flexible approach, rescheduling times and working with the interviewee to travel to their location. Overall we remained values led in our approach to engaging interviewees, not wanting to interview people for the sake of it but rather to keep a high quality of data.

Thematic Analysis

Through the analysis of the 8 successful interviews we have identified **3 thematic strands** that encompass the burden to wellbeing that marginalised people face when engaging with collections.

- **Imbalance of power**
- **Lack of formalised support**
- **Limitations of capacity and support**
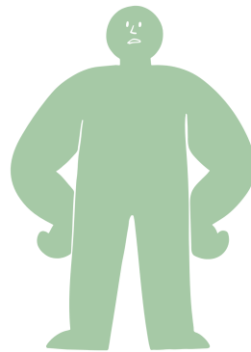
Imbalance of Power

Power dynamics within the sector and particularly in the rurally dispersed context of Cornwall can suffocate the ability of individuals to share the reality of their experience when working with particular organisations and collections.

This imbalance of power is categorised by three core experiences:

Culture of Fear	Tokenism and Extraction of Identities	Gatekeeping Access

Imbalance of Power:
Culture of Fear

There is a pressure for freelancers to minimise their needs to maintain positive relationships; this culture of fear impedes individuals' abilities to advocate for themselves or challenge negative experiences. This experience is widespread in rurally dispersed communities like Cornwall where the sector is especially small and interconnected.

The nature of job roles in the sector is also a factor, often with limited job security, uncertain funding futures and a general lack of opportunities that breeds an uneven power dynamic and a culture of fear of speaking out.

"This sector in Cornwall is so everyone knows each other and I'm constantly so worried about pissing off the wrong people and it like burning my career. Because I don't want to work anywhere else. I want to stay in Cornwall."

Freelancers and individual researchers exist in a particularly vulnerable periphery within the sector as they rely far more on reputation and personal relationships. The need to constantly be visible and engaged with a sector that is often failing them further generates hesitancy to be perceived as rocking the boat or causing trouble.

"I think sometimes it's hard because as a freelancer you get worried about burning bridges with companies."

This environment has a direct negative impact on marginalised researchers and freelancers who feel like they have to overwork or prioritise maintaining face to clients over their own health.

"This is a really big museum, I could get this and then maybe this could lead to more work. Which they kind of dangled in front of me when they were like, if this goes well, we'd love to work with you [...] but with that proviso, if this goes well, so then you have a like, oh, I can't make a fuss."

"Everyone likes talking about mental health issues and the impact of wellbeing, but people don't like it when you are not actually well [...] There's a sense of hiding it as well, like hiding the impact it has because I want people to think I'm professional and not about to break."

For many, this culture of fear exists even before they are able to engage with the sector. Not seeing museums and heritage organisations as spaces where they are welcome, or have value to add.

"I'm only here because I literally clawed my way here. I don't come for this background. I'm not aware. I was never aware of this world until I kind of <laugh> opened my way in."

Imbalance of Power:
Tokenism and Extraction of Identities

The culture of fear for marginalised researchers seems to further exacerbate the feeling of tokenism that hangs over them. Some participants expressed feeling as though organisations will work with them as a tick box exercise to fulfil the diversity and inclusion requirements outlined by funders.

"I think what they wanted to do is say we consulted with X, Y, Z when actually they didn't listen to anything I said."

Museums and heritage organisations can create an alienating environment for many researchers and freelance practitioners. Lived experience and identity can feel like a remedy to the ever growing expectations of funding contracts. Organisations are expected to embed 'inclusion and diversity' as a catch all term into their projects, without any preparation or support for how to safely and positively engage with marginalised people. The cyclical process of funding in our sector often excludes marginalised people and freelancers from decision making. The pressure to fulfil funding expectations about representation means engagement with collections work can feel like a meaningless and extractive process.

"We were asked to [work on] this exhibition and it felt actually what they wanted was just us as a tick box on their applications to say we've, we've done LGBT tick. 'Cause they didn't actually want anything meaningful."

What we then see is the trickle down impact of funding bodies who want to hold their beneficiaries to higher standards of inclusive practice without providing the necessary support and guidance on how to do this purposefully. We are left with a 'them and us' chasm that distances the most vulnerable people from the decisions that directly impact them.

"I think what needs to change are the people that make decisions for the people that aren't there."

Imbalance of Power:
Gatekeeping
Access

The act of gatekeeping access to collections was another major challenge faced by freelancers and marginalised workers. This is especially poignant in Cornwall where there is a distinct intersection between class and Cornish identity, alongside other elements of identities, the complexities of which are rarely represented in museum workforces.

"I think growing up here it could actually be very depressing and very isolating and somewhere that you wanted to escape from. And I think if I had had any sort of idea about the rich tapestry of history and heritage and culture here, I might not have had that kind of, that instant desire to like get out."

It often seems there is missed potential when it comes to collections reaching the people they relate to because they are misinterpreted by the organisations responsible for their care. When looking through this lens it is important to remain aware of the systemic pressures faced by institutions which put limitations on their ability to develop more open and accessible forms of collections engagement.

"It's very much just like you can have it but you can only have what we're gonna tell you you can have, you know, which is so sh*t. And it is, that puts my work back cause I'm constantly having to fight and it's like it shouldn't be hard 'cause this is our history so why are you holding it? Well, it doesn't give you the right to kind of, there's no ownership of it. It should be public property."

We also uncovered a threshold anxiety felt across marginalised communities when accessing museum spaces as well as collections.

"It's such a shame 'cause it should be welcome to everybody. We should be saying come and look. It's interesting. Why don't you come and learn and you've gotta open those doors and they're just not open. And then that's why it is so suffocating."

"I did it all online 'cause there's no way in a million years I'll enter those spaces. No way was I going near those just because I scream don't be here."

This anxiety may be due to the traditional view of history that permanent galleries display, the lack of representation in permanent collections and in the way history communicates an 'othering' of identities.

"It makes me so angry. It's like, I'm really lucky to be here. I'm really lucky to be here. I was like, no, I'm not lucky to be here. They're lucky that I'm here."

Lack of Formalised Support

The work of many researchers and freelance practitioners happens in silo or one off projects which occupy a more isolated position within an organisation. Existing, often, as adjacent to the core team means there is an evident lack of formalised support in place.

The lack of formalised support contributes to:

Uneven Provision of Care

Harmful Communication

Lack of Formalised Support:
Uneven Provision of Care

Many researchers feel as though their wellbeing is at the whim of the informality and inconsistency of support. There seems to be a lack of clear processes in place to support people who have experienced emotional distress caused by engaging with collections. The majority of interviewees reported experiencing 'hit and miss' experience of support, dependent on the individual leading the response.

"I don't think there has been any sort of concept of support for accessing collections in terms of people's wellbeing and, and mental health."

The wariness surrounding how institutions will respond to, mitigate or prevent harmful encounters with collections has meant that many safeguarding processes are driven by individuals, unions or sector support organisations. Even when the impact on wellbeing is acknowledged by organisations, it is not necessarily actioned in a way that creates effective change in the moment.

"Sometimes like that emotion that you're putting towards those institutions just gets washed, washed away and their reaction is not to help. It's just to be like, oh, next time it's future learning. Always, it's always future learning."

When effective care for wellbeing relies more on strong professional relationships, the willingness of individuals and connections to unions or sector support organisations it immediately alienates anyone without access to these few privileged routes of aid.

"A kind of tension between being not from within the institution and being an independent researcher and having to understand what is your responsibility as the freelancer to look after your own mental health, to be able to deliver on a project and not, it's like, what do I put on them and what do I put on me?"

This process contributes to the representation burden experienced by marginalised people, who must often shoulder the burden of harmful experiences and find space to care for themselves when they are failed by the institutions they are working with.

"Nobody cared. Straight up like I don't really have anything else to give you that. Nobody cared. Yeah, nobody wanted to hear it."

Lack of Formalised Support:

Harmful Communication

An often-experienced fall out of the lack of formalised support and structure around working with collections is the harmful communication which can result, particularly regarding collections that relate to the experience of marginalised people.

"I was like, wanted to borrow a collection of photographs [...] so I like went to talk to them about borrowing them and like to see their collection and they like made some remarks that were like quite homophobic and like quite hurtful while talking about the collection."

"I got really upset by like the whole situation and sort of like felt like it was, it made like the process of like borrowing the photographs I think sort of take longer for me in the sense that they wanted me to like send a list of what photographs they wanted and that made it feel like I had to like relive the stuff that they'd said [...] I feel like I did way less than I would've usually 'cause I was so upset by it."

This sort of negative communication does not only exist in the language used relating to collections. It also exists at an institutional level. Organisations are seen by marginalised people as environments where they aren't welcome, they cannot see themselves represented, and in some instances are actively discouraged from engaging with. This harmful communication seems to be derivative of what institutions aren't saying or addressing as much as what they are.

"I really wanted to get involved so I basically just did anything and spent a lot of the time crying because I was like, I'm here and I need to just get on with it, otherwise I'm not gonna get anywhere."

"There's two things which I find confronting and upsetting with collections. And one is the collection itself and one is how the people that look after that collection interact with it."
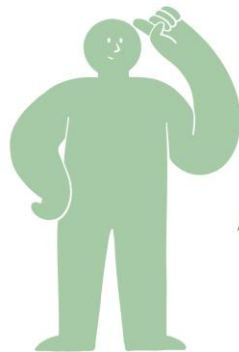
Limitations of Capacity and Support

There is a distinct pressure on the capacity and time of freelancers and researchers, a demand which is exacerbated for marginalised folk working with contentious collections. A similar strain is felt by the organisations caring for these collections, with limited funding, resources are stretched and difficult decisions around priorities must be made.

The intersection of the pressures placed upon individuals and organisations contributes to:

Superficial Approaches to Access

Limitations of Time and Capacity

Limitations of capacity and support:

Superficial Approaches To Access

The systemic lack of awareness and support surrounding the intersectionality of identity in turn leads to superficial approaches to collections access from institutions. Everyone has different access needs depending on the person and the subject matter. Often museums place the needs of the object over the needs of the human. It's a tricky dichotomy for museums to navigate, as the proper collections care needs to be taken but the impact these objects can have on people can require specialist access needs that are not always met.

"It's really alienating and really, really tough. And definitely while I was doing that research I just, yeah, it was just, it, it was really hard and it felt very, very lonely as well. 'Cause often you request things that are coming out and then you're just left on your own in a research room and it's really quite stark and it's obviously, it's kept that way for the objects, but it also can feel quite a bit hospitalised if that

makes sense. Like you're in this cold room on your own far away from other people. It's just you in this object and you are reading about how, you know, someone got commuted to the death sentence because they were in love and were got caught making out, you know, and it's that's just, yeah, really hard hitting”

Even if those caring for collections are from a marginalised community they often face systemic barriers that create distance from the meaning of the collections. The processes of looking after historic collections encourage dispassionate engagement and for staff to create distance between the collections and their personal experiences.

“I think that's a reflection of the diversity of museum staff. Often they don't see it because you are either you work with these objects day in, day out that you are numb to it or it's actually not your history, therefore it doesn't hit as hard.”

There is also a need to understand the nuance of marginalised groups and not to assume and generalise in communications, it's important to value intersectionality of experience instead of a simplified understanding of interpretation.

"And I'm not the voice of the people. I'm not. No. But that can often happen. It's like, oh this is what [Interviewee] said, that's not the case at all. I'm just saying it from my perspective, but let's bring in other young people ‘cause they've all lived separate lives."

Limitations of capacity and support:
Time and Capacity

Time and capacity are a common theme throughout the interviews, with negative impacts being clear for both museums and individuals.

For marginalised individuals there is clearly a representation burden and difficulty in accessing collections. Projects need to consider the time implications of this work. Interviewees described missing deadlines due to the emotional labour of the work and the personal nature of the research that can be doubly hard hitting.

“I felt like some people assume like, oh, you're so busy, that's why you haven't got it done. It's like, actually no, it's ‘cause it's quite confronting and quite hard.”

“I'm not in a great place the last couple of years. Just, just, just your capacity. And you just keep ploughing on. And I, I don't think I feel the pressure from this as much as just coping with the amount of stuff that's incoming.”

Capacity within the sector is also an issue, the impact this difficult work can have for institutions when the sector is facing a cost of living crisis, trickles down into how museums are managed and the time and

capacity the staff have to addressing these issues. The impact this can have is that museums are not properly advocating or serving marginalised communities, both internally in their provision for staff and freelance support, but externally in accessing the building and collections in general.

"One of the big weaknesses is 'cause of lack of investment. People are, not many people in the sector are actually paid to do stuff. It's, it's volunteer activity which is underpinning this important bit of Cornish culture and identity and until, and you need to get the investment in."

"As far as I can tell elsewhere with smaller museums, the HR of often sits with the director just because they don't have capacity."

"They don't care about this stuff because they don't have the facilities and the resources to care about it. You have to take problems when it comes to just like basic accessibility. Like, like having a ramp. Or like yeah. Benches and stuff like that. They, they're just, they don't have the time and the money to care about these things."

In reflection of this capacity and time aspect of institutions, many interviewees acknowledged that it's a problem within the sector, but by centring marginalised history instead of 'othering' their experience, the excuse of time, capacity and money falls away.

"Loads of people say we don't have the funds to do that, but it shouldn't be, my whole thing is it shouldn't be an extra project on the side. If you're talking about museums and you're talking about history, well that includes the spectrum of a human experience. It's not just a traditionalist view of history."

"This should be what you're doing every day. You just build it in. It's that simple."
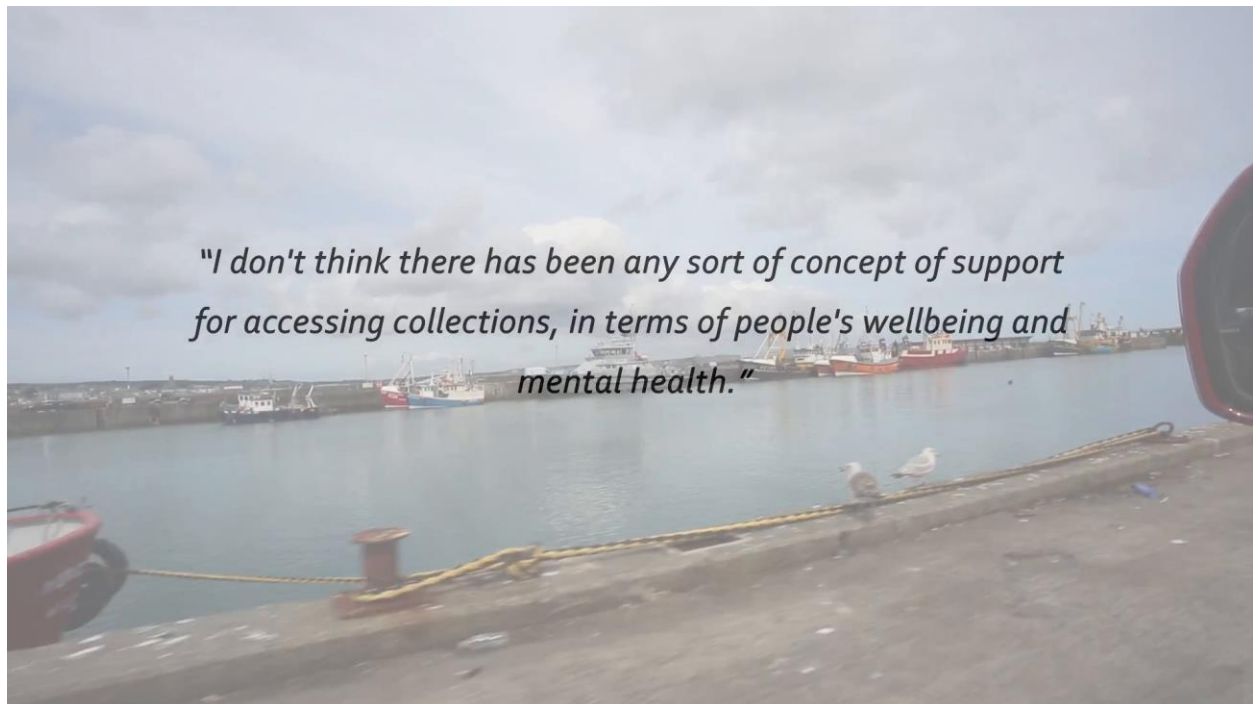
Conclusions and Next Steps

What our research has identified is a prevalent and entrenched lack of support, processes and conversation about how to effectively and safely support marginalised freelancers in accessing collections.

- The need for safeguarding around this work is high, but the impact of limitations to resources like time and budgets trickles down through institutions to directly impact individuals and researchers.

- There's an understanding that the work we undertook, despite our best intentions, was, by nature, an extractive process. In future we will approach interviews by not just considering how we can keep participants safe but through the development of a regenerative and cathartic interview process.

- Museums lack a formal HR process that can leave staff and freelancers vulnerable from a number of angles - it also leaves managers and museum staff who line manage vulnerable due to lack of appropriate training in how to deliver proficient HR.

- The lack of policies around accessing and handling triggering collections is either non-existent or sporadic in approach. This could be standardised to protect staff and researchers.

- Understanding the inherent power structures that the sector is beholden to, despite even the best efforts is something that should always be considered when approaching collections and people.

- We need to deconstruct the idea of 'ownership' over history and develop respect for varied interpretations. If we are able to accept multiple truths about a collection then we open a space where the power to have 'the' answer can be relinquished. Dismantling the power dynamics of marginalised collections and developing a richer view of our histories.

- There's a real need for institutions to work in a flexible and agile way when working with marginalised communities, not all needs will be the same, not each person will react in the same way - give space, time and budget to explore these needs.

This baseline research evidences a further need for development of tools and frameworks which can support museums and heritage organisations in adopting a more proactive, generous and safe process for working with marginalised people. Such tools must be developed in collaboration with the marginalised people they would aim to support, on the basis of the development of a richer and more diverse data set. The development of this data set must focus on a regenerative approach to data gathering, ensuring that value is gained by participants and those collecting data alike.

Safe Access Video

"I don't think there has been any sort of concept of support for accessing collections, in terms of people's wellbeing and mental health."

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