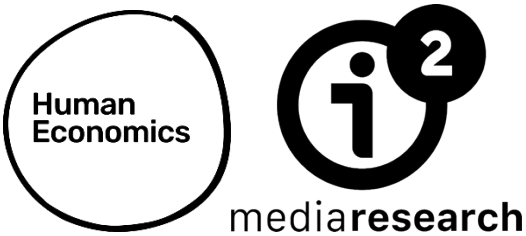
Archives, manuscripts and material culture in life, health and wellbeing research

About this Study

This study was produced by Human Economics and i2 Media Research in 2025 on behalf of Wellcome's Discovery Research team. It reflects the collective contributions of researchers, funders, collections professionals, and advisors committed to strengthening the future of archives, manuscripts, and material culture in research relevant to life, health and wellbeing.



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Executive Summary

Collections of archives, manuscripts and material culture hold profound potential for advancing knowledge about life, health and wellbeing.

They include oral histories of illness and care, hospital records, family papers, protest ephemera, natural history specimens and digital traces of lived experience.

These collections exist in both analogue and digital forms, spanning personal papers, institutional records, visual and audio materials, and physical artefacts from museums and other repositories.

Collectively they offer unique and often underexplored perspectives on how health is experienced, understood, and structured across time and place.

Commissioned by Wellcome, this study set out to map this research ecosystem. The report examines how such collections are currently used in research, what barriers limit their potential, and how they could be more effectively supported as enablers of discovery.

It highlights not only the historical value of these sources, but also their role as spaces for creativity, methodological innovation and cross-disciplinary experimentation that can generate transformative insights.

Approach

This study was conducted in 2025 through an integrated programme of research:

- Literature review of more than 500 publications.
- Survey of 86 researchers and collections professionals worldwide.
- Interviews with 32 leading experts across academia, heritage, and policy.
- Advisory engagement through a dedicated board representing diverse expertise.
- This mixed-methods approach has generated the first system-wide evidence base on how collections contribute to discovery research in life, health, and wellbeing.

This was a global study, with a primary focus on the UK, Ireland and lower- and middle-income countries, in line with Wellcome's Discovery Research strategy[1]. A strong commitment to equity, inclusion, and epistemic pluralism was embedded throughout its design.

Findings

This study finds that archives, manuscripts, and material culture collections are foundational infrastructures for discovery research in life, health, and wellbeing.

They bring unique perspectives and sources of evidence, and their contribution can be deepened through targeted interventions in skills, infrastructure, and governance.

Below we set out our three core insights.

Three core insights:

Breadth with untapped potential: Collections are extraordinarily diverse. They already support research that cuts across disciplines and geographies - but many remain underused. With greater coordination, visibility and support, their potential can be unlocked.

Systemic weakness that can be addressed: Access, infrastructure and skills are uneven and fragile. Digital systems are often fragmented; career pathways remain precarious. Yet these challenges can be met through targeted investment in standards, capacity building and recognition.

Opportunities for transformation: New infrastructures, technologies and partnerships are changing what is possible. Investment in skills, data standards and open platforms can unlock research at scale. Collaboration shows a clear pathway to growth with strategic support and space for experimentation.

Recommendations

The study identifies 15 recommendations, offering potential points of entry for funders, institutions, researchers, communities, and policymakers. These are organised into three complementary layers:

- **Field Development Recommendations (FDR)** - Small-scale, catalytic interventions that build early-stage capacity, participation and visibility across the ecosystem, especially for new or underrepresented participants.
- **Infrastructure & Enabler Recommendations (IER)** - Infrastructure, or practice interventions that address foundational constraints and strengthen the technical, organisational, and ethical systems that enable discovery research.
- **Programme & Policy Recommendations (PPR)** - High-level, structural actions that reorient governance, investment, and research framing, embedding sustained investment and innovation across the ecosystem.

Together these categories provide a set of opportunities from immediate enabling steps to long-term systemic transformation, ensuring that collections can fully realise their potential as infrastructures for discovery research in life, health, and wellbeing.

A call to action

Realising the full potential of archives, manuscripts, and material culture collections requires collective action across the sector. Researchers, collections professionals, institutions, funders, and communities all have a role to play in strengthening infrastructures, widening participation, and creating the conditions for innovation. Lasting change will depend on shared responsibility and collaboration across boundaries.

This report demonstrates that the ecosystem already holds profound resources and proven ambition. With strategic support and space for experimentation, it can grow into a coherent, inclusive, and sustainable infrastructure for discovery research.

The challenge now is to invest, coordinate, and innovate together - enabling collections to unlock transformative insights into life, health, and wellbeing for the future.

1.0 Introduction and Purpose

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This study's purpose is to explore the role of archives, manuscripts and material culture in enabling discovery research into life, health and wellbeing.

The study shows means by which such collections can be better recognized, connected and supported as enablers of transformative new knowledge.

The report is designed not only to inform strategy but also to spark ideas, raise the profile of innovative practice, and encourage experimentation across the wider sector.

The study is grounded in the hypothesis articulated in Wellcome's commission: that archives, manuscripts and material culture collections already function as essential infrastructure for discovery research in life, health and wellbeing, but are not optimally resourced, coordinated or governed to address the barriers that impede their use[2].

The study provides an evidence-based assessment of how these collections are currently used, what their unrealised potential may be, and how funders, institutions and researchers might work together to enhance their value over the next decade. It maps the intellectual and institutional lineage of the ecosystem, situating present day practices within a longer history of disciplinary development and infrastructure change.

The emphasis throughout is on discovery research: research that advances fundamental understanding, poses new questions, and reshapes knowledge in ways that are foundational for future enquiry. This report focuses specifically on their potential to generate new insights about life, health, and wellbeing in the humanities, social sciences, and life sciences.

Audiences and use

Although commissioned by Wellcome, this report is intended to speak to a broad community of stakeholders. These include:

- Researchers and research teams working with or around relevant collections;
- Collections professionals and institutions curating, preserving and enabling access;
- Funders and infrastructure providers shaping national and international research agendas;
- Policy actors and cultural agencies concerned with the health, equity, and sustainability of the wider research ecosystem.

The analysis and recommendations presented here are designed to inform strategic decision-making across these communities, and to inspire new forms of experimentation and innovation, demonstrating how archives, manuscripts, and material culture collections can function as infrastructures for discovery research.

Method and scope

To understand their current and potential use for life, health and wellbeing research, the development of this Study followed a phased methodology:

- **Phase 1** established a conceptual and strategic framework for the ecosystem and mapped the existing evidence base;
- **Phase 2** gathered new insights through 32 interviews, 86 survey responses and 3 Advisory Board meetings;
- **Phase 3** synthesised the findings into a shared frame for discovery; a thematic landscape analysis, and a portfolio of recommendations for future development.

This was a global study. Its analysis draws on interviews, surveys, expert reflections, case exemplars, and secondary literature to ensure a wide-ranging synthesis.

A full account of the research process is provided in **Chapter 2**.

Objectives of the study

The study responds directly to the four objectives outlined in Wellcome's Commission:

- Describe the unique value of archive, manuscript and material culture resources for understanding life, health and wellbeing across the humanities, social sciences and life sciences.
- Identify the barriers to significantly enhancing the use of these resources in life, health and wellbeing discovery research.
- Detail the approaches, technologies and capabilities that could help overcome these challenges.
- Define the opportunities for transformative research that could be enabled through enhanced use of these collections.

The work is grounded in the hypothesis articulated in Wellcome's commission: that Archives, Manuscripts, and Material Culture collections (AMCs) already function as essential infrastructure for discovery research in life, health, and wellbeing, but are not optimally resourced, coordinated, or governed to address the barriers that impede their use.

Focus and definitions

This study focuses on the use of AMCs collections in research contexts relevant to life, health and wellbeing. These collections include both analogue and digital sources, encompassing personal papers, institutional records, visual and audio materials, and physical artefacts from libraries, museums and other repositories. They represent distinctive infrastructures for creativity, experimentation, and methodological innovation, capable of generating new perspectives on health and life across time and place.

Our definition of life, health and wellbeing research follows the framing developed through Wellcome's Discovery Research strategy. We include:

- Historical, social, cultural and anthropological research into health systems, medical knowledge, and lived experiences of illness and care;
- Investigations of environments, ecologies, and biological processes as they relate to human and planetary health;
- Critical, creative and speculative research that offers new models, metaphors or imaginaries of life and wellbeing.

Throughout, our concern is with the conditions and capabilities that enable discovery research and in highlighting how AMCs act as infrastructures for discovery research.

Role of Wellcome in the commission

This study was commissioned by Wellcome as part of its wider commitment to understanding and enabling discovery research. The project specification was developed by Wellcome's Discovery Research team and awarded through a competitive tendering process. Wellcome staff and advisors provided strategic oversight throughout the project, including feedback on interim deliverables and participation in Advisory Board discussions.

However, the views expressed in this report are those of the research team. The findings and recommendations represent an independent synthesis of evidence and expert insight, intended to inform the sector as a whole.

Structure of the report

Following this introduction, the report is organised into six further chapters:

- **Chapter 2.0** describes the research process and methods.
- **Chapter 3.0** situates the study within the broader research landscape.
- **Chapter 4.0** presents a thematic analysis of the ecosystem.
- **Chapter 5.0** presents our recommendations.
- **Chapter 6.0** analyses how the recommendations interlink
- **Chapter 7.0** concludes with reflections on the implications for the wider ecosystem.

2.0 Approach and Method

2.0 Approach and Method

The primary research underpinning the study was delivered in three iterative phases in 2025.

Our approach to this study created a triangulated evidence base comprising over 500 publications, 32 in-depth interviews, 86 survey responses and three Advisory Board meeting.

Phase 1 - Frameworks and framing

This foundational phase developed the Study's initial framing and strategic direction. Activities included:

- Developing working definitions of AMCs;
- Conducting a literature review using AI-assisted methods that identified over 500 interdisciplinary papers linking AMCs to humanities and social sciences research on health, life and wellbeing;
- Designing a research framework including core research questions, fieldwork methodologies, and an inclusive typology of AMCs;
- Establishing principles for diversity, equity and inclusion;
- Convening an Advisory Board and holding the first consultation meeting.

These outputs reinforced one another and highlighted a set of initial themes, barriers, and challenges.

The Literature review

The literature review provided a baseline map of research activity and surfaced the historical layering of the ecosystem-connecting present-day research to past programmes, disciplinary traditions, and institutional centres that have shaped collections-based inquiry into life and health.

The systematic literature review, used an AI-assisted pipeline to identify 524 publications (2022-25) explicitly connecting AMCs to life, health, and wellbeing research in the humanities and social sciences.

The review:

- Mapped disciplinary breadth, identifying strong clusters in archaeology, conservation, museology, digital heritage, HCI, environmental health and medical humanities.
- Highlighted initial cross-cutting opportunities including research innovation, interdisciplinarity, digital enablement, expanded narratives of health, and public/policy engagement.
- Surfaced persistent challenges including researcher confidence, data/technology gaps, infrastructure weakness, and ethics/community issues.
- Provided the foundation for the Study's working definitions, typology of research value, and the design of Phase 2 sampling.

The outputs of the literature review informed the definitions and frameworks adopted in this report, and were integrated into the thematic analysis in Chapter 4 to ensure findings were grounded in published scholarship as well as fieldwork evidence.

A full description of the literature review's methodology is included in **Annex D**.

Literature Review - Data Snapshot:

Corpus size:

524 items.

Domains: Social Sciences 232; Physical Sciences 213; Health Sciences 54; Life Sciences 25.

Fields (top): Arts & Humanities 137; Computer Science 105; Social Sciences 64; Earth & Planetary Sciences 57; Medicine 33.

Subfields (selected): Archaeology 58; Conservation 51; Information Systems 45; Human Computer Interaction 24; Museology 19; AI 13.

Top Sustainable Development Goals: Sustainable Cities & Communities 184; Quality Education 60; Industry/Innovation/Infrastructure 25; Good Health & Well-Being 9.

Phase 2 – Fieldwork design and data collection

This phase used mixed-methods primary research and consultation to extend and test our understanding from Phase 1 and involved:

- 32 in-depth interviews with researchers, collections professionals, funders and institutional stakeholders, to explore current practices, the value of AMCs, infrastructure, and future potential to unlock transformative impacts.
- A 15-minute online survey targeted at researchers with 86 valid responses. The survey explored AMC value, barriers and enablers and opportunities. Survey questions focused on barriers to access, metadata quality, digital infrastructure and capability gaps.
- A guided Advisory Board workshop validated key themes and surfaced priorities.

The fieldwork explored current use, barriers, value generation, digital capability, equity, funding and future potential. Interviews and surveys provided complementary depth and breadth, while Advisory Board input strengthened the interpretive framework and helped us align with Wellcome's Discovery Research strategy.

Phase 3 – Synthesis and strategic mapping

This phase integrated all findings and developed the thematic landscape and recommendations. Analysis followed a structured three-stage framework:

- AI-assisted thematic coding of interviews and surveys across 13 core themes aligned to Discovery Research strategy.
- Analysis to identify patterns, gaps and points of intervention
- Strategic synthesis including developing a new definition of the ecosystem, thematic mapping, identifying adjacent research domains, and creating a portfolio of recommendations.

The Role of the Advisory Board

An Advisory Board of sector experts was convened to guide the study's development.

Members were drawn from across research, collections, policy, and infrastructure domains, with an emphasis on interdisciplinary and international perspectives. Their involvement was central to the study's development.

The Advisory Board met three times: at inception, during fieldwork, and during the development of recommendations, and provided structured feedback on framing documents, emerging findings, and draft recommendations.

While the study team retains responsibility for the final synthesis, the Advisory Board's expertise is reflected in both the direction and substance of this report. A full list of Advisory Board members, alongside details of the extended research team and fieldwork participants, is provided in **Annex C**.

3.0 History and Context: Defining the Ecosystem

3.0 History and Context: Defining the Ecosystem

Discovery research using archives, manuscripts and material culture to understand life, health and wellbeing is not a new phenomenon.

It has emerged from the convergence of multiple disciplinary traditions, shifting institutional priorities and fragmented infrastructures. Together these have created a fertile, distributed and evolving research ecosystem.

AMCs are typically stewarded by libraries, archives, museums, universities, and specialist repositories. Established infrastructures include national memory institutions (such as The National Archives), international standards and networks (for example the International Council of Archives), and large-scale digitisation and aggregation programmes (such as Europeana).

Emergent infrastructures include collaborative platforms like DiSSCo[3], community archives, and open-source digital repositories. Together these demonstrate both the durability of long-established systems and the dynamism of new experimental forms - reshaping possibilities for discovery research and innovation.

This chapter traces how the ecosystem has developed, outlining the intellectual, institutional, and infrastructural foundations that underpin its current shape. Evidence is drawn from the literature review, interviews, survey responses, and Advisory Board discussions.

A short history of the research ecosystem

1950s-2000s: Early ecosystem development

The ecosystem has evolved out of well-established disciplines such as history of medicine, anthropology of care, science and technology studies (STS), archaeology, and museum and archival studies.

Since the mid-20th century, scholars have engaged with AMCs to understand how health, illness and care are experienced, understood and represented across societies. In medical history, hospital records, physicians' casebooks and government archives provided the basis for epidemiological studies of disease and institutional medicine[4].

Anthropologists and ethnographers documented healing practices, kinship systems and embodied experience, often resulting in collections now held by cultural institutions[5]. Archaeology and bioarchaeology provided additional perspectives: palaeopathological studies of skeletal remains illuminated histories of malnutrition, trauma and infection[6], while mortuary archaeology and isotopic analysis traced long-term shifts in diet and environmental stress[7].

In the early 2000s, these traditions were recontextualised through the rise of medical humanities and the expanding influence of STS. Institutional centres such as the Centre for Global Health Histories (York) provided focal points for interdisciplinary work linking colonial medicine, public health systems, and the cultural politics of diagnosis. STS scholarship reframed knowledge practices as situated and infrastructural[8].

The digital humanities movement also reshaped archival practice, introducing new forms of digitisation, access and analysis. Wellcome's Research Resources in Medical History scheme[9], launched in 2001, funded core work. This programme built critical core access for an emerging community of researchers. Together, these developments laid the groundwork for a distributed ecosystem that was continually experimenting with new methods and perspectives on life, health, and wellbeing.

2010s to today: Ethics, equality and collections at risk

From the 2010s onward, shifts in research ethics placed new emphases on co-production, oral history, and community archiving. Community archives have been central here, advocating for participatory and reparative approaches that challenge extractive models of research[10].

This was especially visible in disability history, reproductive justice, racialised health inequalities and Indigenous knowledge systems[11]. These developments demanded more inclusive archival infrastructures - capable of supporting multilingual curation and locally governed access.

The literature review confirms that material culture has grown in significance: conservation science, museology and archaeology now account for substantial clusters of research[12]. Imaging and digital modelling are opening new possibilities for analysis and repatriation[13].

At the same time, earlier investments in AMC-based research - such as resource schemes and dedicated disciplinary centres - were absorbed into broader frameworks.

Yet this period also saw the emergence of participatory and reparative approaches, underscoring how collections-based research can innovate in response to changing ethical, social, and cultural conditions.

> "I work in a medical archive and I'm a trained historian. But what I'm really trying to do is understand how ideas of care have changed. That's discovery, and it takes time."
>
> **- Interviewee**

The research ecosystem today

The ecosystem today brings together diverse disciplines and practices: history, anthropology, archaeology, conservation, museology, medical humanities, digital heritage and environmental health. The literature review mapped 524 publications (2022-25) across these domains, showing how methods from bioarchaeology, digital humanities, and community archiving are converging.

Interviewees and survey respondents echoed this clustering, emphasising both opportunities and challenges of working across boundaries. Notably, however, archaeology and bioarchaeology - despite surfacing strongly in the literature - were mentioned far less often in survey or interview data. This suggests a structural disjunction: while these disciplines generate substantial research relevant to health and wellbeing, they may not self-identify as part of this emergent ecosystem, nor be visible to funders framing collections primarily through biomedical or humanities categories.

Archivists and collections professionals continue to shape conditions for discovery, which researchers in turn animate, reinterpret and extend. This shared stewardship calls for infrastructures built on mutual investment, visibility and trust.

What this ecosystem makes possible

To better understand the contribution of this ecosystem to discovery research, we developed a typology of the kinds of value such research can generate. This typology emerged from interview and survey data, and was refined through comparison with literature and strategic frameworks.

Figure 1: Five modes of research value

Type of Value	Description	Illustrative Examples
Epistemic	Generating new knowledge about health, illness, and life by interrogating historical, cultural, and material sources.	A historian tracing the emergence of diagnostic categories through asylum records; an anthropologist analysing colonial medical archives.
Contextualising	Situating health challenges in deeper historical, environmental, or social context.	A bioarchaeologist analysing skeletal remains to trace the long history of malnutrition in industrial towns.
Critical and Reflective	Questioning dominant narratives, exposing power relations, and challenging marginalisation in health systems and medical knowledge.	Research on race and reproductive health using community-collected artefacts and narratives.
Participatory and Reparative	Co-producing research with communities to surface suppressed histories, return narrative agency, or enable collective meaning-making.	Collaborative research with disabled people using institutional records to uncover and reinterpret histories of care.
Speculative and Imaginative	Using archival or material sources to construct alternative visions of health, wellbeing, and life futures.	Artistic reinterpretations of medical images; fictional case histories that reimagine public health policy.

In practice, these forms of research value often overlap. A single project may combine critical reinterpretation with participatory co-production and speculative outcomes. Together, they illustrate the richness of discovery research with AMCs, showing how such work can generate value that is cumulative, process-driven, and transformative in ways not always captured by conventional metrics.

Recognising and supporting this diversity of value is essential for enabling collections to fulfil their full potential. These approaches are frequently under-recognised - particularly when value is slow, relational, or process-driven. Recognising these diverse modes of value, including those that are speculative or experimental, is essential for enabling collections to fulfil their transformative potential.

This typology informs our recommendations and helps frame the field not only in terms of thematic content, but in the diverse ways it contributes to knowledge production and public meaning-making.

Defining the ecosystem:

Collections-based research in life, health and wellbeing uses diverse, often under-recognised archives, manuscripts and material culture as dynamic infrastructures for discovery.

It is grounded in interdisciplinary inquiry, shaped by institutional and community practice, and oriented toward generating new knowledge about human experience across time, place and society

Positioning the ecosystem: adjacent methods and connections

The ecosystem is distributed and evolving, encompassing multiple disciplines and infrastructures that intersect through their shared engagement with collections. What may appear as “adjacent” fields - such as medical humanities, anthropology, environmental history, and science and technology studies - are in fact integral to this ecosystem, generating much of the discovery research on life, health, and wellbeing.

The challenge is less about bridging across distinct fields and more about strengthening visibility, connections, and coherence within a shared but distributed system[14].

Intersecting domains

Medical Humanities and Health Humanities, which bring humanities methods to bear on medical questions, often working with literature, visual culture, and ethics. Increasingly, scholars in these fields are engaging directly with archival and material culture collections[15]. For example, the "Pathologies of Solitude" project[16] at Queen Mary University of London used literary and archival sources to explore the history of mental health and isolation, which created a new dialogue between health professionals and policy makers based on the use of literary and archival sources.

History of Medicine and Public Health is a mature domain with deep archival roots but often remains siloed from interdisciplinary or community-engaged research. Projects like "The Cultural History of the NHS"[17] at Warwick University have demonstrated how institutional records, and visual ephemera can illuminate public perceptions of health systems over time[18].

Anthropology and Ethnography of Health and Care encompass work with personal archives, fieldnotes, and artefacts. For example, researchers examining childbirth practices in the Global South often incorporate material objects like birthing kits, ceremonial textiles, or family photographs to explore embodied knowledge[19].

Environmental History and Political Ecology intersect with collections documenting land use, pollution, biodiversity, and multispecies entanglement. An example is the use of historical maps and agricultural records to trace pesticide exposure and its impact on human and environmental health[20].

Science and Technology Studies (STS) offers critical tools for understanding how collections structure and constrain knowledge production. Projects such as the Wellcome-funded "Hidden in Plain Sight"[21] have used STS frameworks to interrogate classification systems and institutional metadata.

These are not external domains but part of the distributed ecosystem, contributing methods, infrastructures, and bodies of knowledge that together shape discovery research in life, health, and wellbeing.

Strengthening connections across them will surface underused resources and build coherence across the system.

Shared infrastructure and methodologies

Beyond disciplinary adjacency, collections-based discovery research aligns with major strategic priorities across health, equity, and the environment. Key touchpoints include:

Global Health Histories: There is increasing recognition of the need to historicise contemporary health systems, especially in postcolonial and transnational contexts. MIT's Global Health and Medical Humanities initiative aims to, "look at illness and disease from multiple perspectives, not only as a matter of individual physiology."[22]

Climate and Planetary Health: Collections documenting land use, industrial legacies, and traditional ecological knowledge are being revisited through the lens of planetary wellbeing. The "Toxic Legacies"[23] project traces the long-term health impacts of environmental contamination.

Data Justice and Epistemic Inequality: As health research becomes increasingly data-driven, questions of representation, metadata, and access grow more urgent. Initiatives like the "Digital Library of the Caribbean"[24] are experimenting with community governance and multilingual access frameworks.

Engaging with these agendas strengthens the ecosystem's policy relevance and unlocks new funding routes. It also makes visible the cultural, historical, and material dimensions of challenges often framed solely in scientific or clinical terms. Far from being peripheral, these engagements demonstrate the ecosystem's centrality to wider research priorities.

Implications for investment and collaboration

Emergent research areas offer fertile ground for innovation in collections-based health and wellbeing research:

Global Health Humanities: This interdisciplinary space draws on history, anthropology, and cultural studies to explore health from plural perspectives[25]. Projects led by scholars in the Global South have used community archives to surface vernacular health practices.

Data Feminism and Postcolonial Data Studies: These fields interrogate how archival silences and metadata norms reproduce structural inequalities. Researchers are experimenting with feminist annotation methods to reshape collections as tools of justice.[26]

Creative AI and Experimental Media: Artists and digital humanists are increasingly using collections to train generative models, build immersive environments, or create speculative futures.

Planetary Health: Interdisciplinary teams are beginning to integrate natural history specimens, land-use records, and indigenous ecological knowledge to trace the entangled histories of human and environmental wellbeing[27].

These frontiers point toward more collaborative and experimental forms of knowledge production, while challenging infrastructures to accommodate speculative, participatory, and process-based approaches. They underline the ecosystem's role as a place where creativity, speculation, and collaboration converge to reimagine what research on life, health, and wellbeing can be.

Connecting the dots: Why these links matter

Situating the ecosystem clarifies both its potential and its precarity. While it intersects with adjacent domains and global priorities, it lacks consistent institutional support, strategic recognition, and infrastructural visibility.

Mapping these connections highlights opportunities for investment, collaboration, and shared learning. It also reinforces a central finding of this study:

Discovery is not confined to disciplinary boundaries - it emerges in the spaces between them. Connecting between boundaries is a huge opportunity.

Recognising all of these domains as integral parts of a distributed and evolving ecosystem helps clarify both its potential and its precarity

The ecosystem requires investment in the connective tissue that will allow innovation and experimentation to flourish.

The connections mapped here demonstrate that collections-based discovery research is not an isolated endeavour, but one that crosses disciplines, institutions, and strategic priorities.

These adjacencies underscore the relevance of the recommendations that follow, particularly those related to infrastructure, interdisciplinarity, and equity.

Three Opportunities to Build Connective Tissue:

Between: researchers and collections professionals working in parallel;

Between: adjacent fields that share methods but not language;

Between: strategic funders in health, environment, culture and infrastructure.

4.0 What the Ecosystem Needs Now

4.0 What the Ecosystem Needs Now

This chapter presents a thematic synthesis of our research and fieldwork findings, drawing on interviews, a targeted survey and triangulation with the literature review.

Each theme addresses how AMCs are currently used and how they could be better supported in discovery research into life, health and wellbeing.

This process is intended to reflect both the lived realities of the ecosystem and the strategic directions needed to support future discovery research. The themes form the basis for the recommendations in **Chapter 5**, offering an integrated picture of where the ecosystem stands and plausible routes forward.

These themes, and the case studies that support them, present a curated framework highlighting the most strategically significant issues surfaced by the data; they are not an exhaustive account of every insight shared.

Each of the following 13 insights highlights specific barriers, challenges, and opportunities shaping collections-based discovery research. For clarity, a consolidated overview of these is provided in **Annex B**, which brings them together in a single table for ease of reference and reuse.

How we developed the themes:

Themes were derived through a structured process of coding, clustering and triangulation:

Step 1 - Open coding of interviews and survey responses to surface recurring patterns, priorities and tensions.

Step 2 - Grouping and synthesis into candidate themes.

Step 3 - Analysis of barriers, challenges, and opportunities.

Step 4 - Validation and refinement through triangulation with literature review findings and Advisory Board discussions.

Theme 1: Breadth of use - What's being valued, what's overlooked?

The AMCs used in discovery research on life, health and wellbeing are strikingly diverse-ranging from institutional health archives and natural-history specimens to family papers, protest ephemera, photographic albums and born-digital platforms.

This breadth reflects the wide-ranging nature of humanities and social-sciences research, where questions of illness, care, and lived experience connect to many different material forms. It also underlines a central feature of the ecosystem: its distributed and evolving character, where multiple kinds of collections contribute to discovery in complementary ways.

Despite this range, certain AMC types remain significantly underused. Gaps in cataloguing and discovery systems limit the visibility of regional, community, and undigitised collections. Materials from marginalised communities or from the Global South are particularly difficult to access, even when their existence is known. Born-digital records face risks of fragility, obsolescence, and uncertain long-term preservation. At the same time, biomedical institutional records are precarious, with no guarantee of long-term survival[28].

The source landscape remains uneven. Born-digital records from the late 20th and 21st centuries face risks of fragility, technical obsolescence and uncertain long-term preservation. At the same time, community archives and everyday perspectives are under-represented in the published literature and fieldwork data.

Survey responses reinforced this picture: 62% of respondents reported difficulty identifying relevant collections due to inconsistent cataloguing and dispersed discovery systems, and over half described serendipity as their main route to discovery.

Researchers use these collections to reconstruct past environments, trace social movements, interrogate visual culture, study diagnostic categories and explore care practices. Material-culture objects were consistently identified as offering distinctive epistemic and affective insights into health and wellbeing. Yet these are rarely prioritised for digitisation or integrated into health-related infrastructures.

Key Insights:

62%

Of researchers reported **difficulties** identifying relevant collections.

Discovery is limited by **fragmented** cataloguing, uneven data and dispersed discovery systems.

Resources like material culture and community archives remain **under-recognised**.

Archivists and collections professionals provide **essential** connective labour.

Born digital records are highly **vulnerable**.

Implications:

Supporting discovery requires a more expansive sense of what counts as a “health-related” collection and investment in infrastructures that reflect this diversity. Recognition and resourcing of curatorial expertise is vital to ensure overlooked collections are surfaced and mobilised. By broadening the frame, researchers and institutions can unlock perspectives on health and wellbeing that extend far beyond biomedical paradigms.

> “I don’t go in knowing what I’ll find - the collection itself reshapes the question.”
>
> **- Interviewee**

Case Study: The British Library Endangered Archives Programme

Established in 2004 with funding from Arcadia and hosted by the British Library, the Endangered Archives Programme (EAP) supports the preservation and digitisation of at-risk archival materials worldwide. Projects have ranged from documenting indigenous healing practices in Latin America to safeguarding midwifery records, epidemic response reports, and ritual texts in South Asia and Africa. By 2023, the programme had funded over 450 projects in 90 countries, creating millions of digital images now openly accessible through the British Library’s platform.

EAP demonstrates how overlooked or fragile collections can be surfaced, stabilised, and made globally visible, enabling new forms of research. It also highlights wider issues of sustainability, equity, and stewardship raised across this study: how context is preserved alongside digital surrogates, how resourcing is distributed, and how to widen access to funding opportunities beyond established institutions.

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Theme 2: Rethinking relevance – How the ecosystem connects to health.

Collections-based research in the humanities and social sciences contributes to understandings of health and wellbeing in deeply contextual ways.

Interviewees emphasised that archives and material culture enable exploration of lived experience, the historical shaping of medical systems, the cultural politics of diagnosis and the social determinants of health over time. The literature review reinforces this: many of the 524 publications connect to health indirectly, embedding relevance in studies of environment, migration, memory, kinship or material practices rather than through clinical records alone.

However, many researchers reported that their work is not always recognised as "health-related" by funders, institutions or infrastructure providers. Relevance is often thematic, embedded in broader investigations of culture, environment or society. This interpretive quality is a strength, but not always well reflected in existing funding or institutional frameworks. For example, material-culture collections may include artefacts of protest, devotional objects or domestic tools. These objects shed light on embodied understandings of health and care but do not fit biomedical paradigms.

This challenge is especially acute for researchers working with emotional, reproductive, mental or community health topics[29]. Here, AMCs might consist of poetry, pamphlets, protest materials or personal objects rather than institutional records. The literature review shows that such sources are increasingly mobilised for discovery[30], yet survey respondents said they often had to "translate" their work into biomedical language to secure support. 71% of respondents agreed their research advanced understanding of health and wellbeing, but only 38% felt that recognition was reflected in funding or institutional frameworks.

Advisory Board members underlined that relevance to health cannot be reduced to narrow clinical framings; it must accommodate plural and situated understandings. Work in medical humanities shows how poetry, protest materials and oral histories surface health narratives outside biomedical framings.

Key Insights:

71%

Of researchers agreed their research **advanced** understanding of health and wellbeing.

Relevance is often thematic but indirect - researchers **explore** how systems shape health outcomes.

Multiple definitions of health **co-exist** but remain unevenly recongnised.

Wellbeing is particularly **under-theorised** in collections research - yet is crucial for work on care, resilience and identity.

Implications:

Discovery research benefits from flexible frameworks for assessing relevance, recognising that collections can illuminate health and wellbeing in diverse and plural ways. Valuing the interpretive work of researchers and curators can broaden the conceptual horizons of health research, including projects addressing inequality and reimagining wellbeing.

> "I've had to rewrite the project to make the health connection more legible - even though that was always the heart of the work."
>
> **- Interviewee**

Case Study: Pathologies of Solitude

The "Pathologies of Solitude" project at Queen Mary University of London (2017-2022)[31], funded by the Wellcome Trust, explored the history of solitude, mental health, and wellbeing from the 18th century to the present. Researchers combined literary texts, archival records, and material culture to investigate how solitude has been understood and experienced in medical, cultural, and social contexts.

The project demonstrates how AMCs that do not fit neatly into biomedical paradigms - such as diaries, letters, poetry, or visual culture - can nonetheless provide vital insights into health and wellbeing. It also highlights the interpretive labour required to make these links visible: researchers reported having to "translate" their work into more legible health framings for funders and institutions, echoing challenges raised by our survey respondents.

Theme 3: Research value - What it looks like and why it's hard to measure

Researchers articulated a broad spectrum of ways in which collections generate value, extending beyond traditional heritage metrics.

Interviewees described how working with AMCs enabled unexpected connections, expanded research questions and fostered collaborative and affective engagement. The literature review aligns with this: across the 524 publications analysed, five opportunity areas were prominent, with particularly strong clusters around epistemic, participatory and affective value that conventional frameworks rarely capture.

Examples such as Wellcome's Mindscapes essay series[32] illustrate this diversity, surfacing interpretive, speculative and affective insights into mental health through collections-based reflection. Yet such outputs often sit outside conventional measures of value, which prioritise quantifiable indicators such as digitisation counts, economic returns or citation metrics.[41]

Survey evidence confirmed this disjuncture: more than 75% of respondents felt that the value of collections work is underestimated or poorly captured by existing evaluation frameworks. Respondents pointed to intangible or process-driven outcomes-from building relationships with communities, to developing new interpretive categories, to creative outputs-as critical contributions to discovery that are largely invisible to conventional reporting. Advisory Board members emphasised that value is often long-horizon and relational, surfacing through practices of care, curation and co-production.

Material culture was frequently cited as a site where value resists easy measurement. Conservation, imaging and engagement with artefacts can generate new data and also affective and speculative insight. These contributions challenge the notion that value is linear or immediate; instead, they indicate value that is multi-dimensional, contingent and often transformative over time.

Key Insights:

75%

Of survey respondents felt the value of collections work is **underestimated** in evaluation frameworks.

Discovery research is often slow, **indirect** or relational.

Emotional and **affective value** is central.

Economic or impact narratives **rarely align** with epistemic, cultural or affective significance.

Researchers call for **"values pluralism"** that recognise more than conventional metrics.

Implications:

To realise the discovery potential of collections, funders and institutions should adopt broader, plural approaches to value. This includes recognising process as well as output and acknowledging that foundational insights often arise through long-term, relational and speculative work.

Researchers create value not only through scholarship but also by generating new metadata, surfacing underused holdings and reinterpreting collections. This represents an opportunity to strengthen evaluation frameworks so they capture epistemic, cultural, affective, and community value alongside conventional metrics, ensuring the full richness of discovery research is visible and supported.

> "The value isn't just what the collection contains. It's what it makes possible."
>
> **- Interviewee**

Case Study: Wellcome Mindscapes

Wellcome Mindscapes was a global cultural programme (2019-2023) that explored mental health through exhibitions, artistic commissions, and research collaborations across India, Nigeria, Germany, and the UK. The programme drew heavily on archives, oral histories, and creative reinterpretations of collections to generate new understandings of mental health. Outputs included co-produced exhibitions in Bangalore and Lagos, digital storytelling projects, and reflective essays engaging with lived experience and cultural heritage.

Mindscapes exemplifies how collections-based research creates intangible, affective, and speculative value that can be transformative but is difficult to capture with conventional metrics. The programme surfaced narratives of trauma, resilience, and community care that extended well beyond traditional health data, while also challenging dominant psychiatric framings. Participants described its value not only in knowledge terms but in building trust, sparking dialogue, and enabling imaginative reconfigurations of mental health.

Theme 4: Systems that shape discovery - Access, inequality, infrastructure

Infrastructure emerged as one of the most consistent and urgent themes across interviews, survey responses, and the literature review.

As noted by Star & Bowker[33] infrastructures shape classification and discovery. Researchers in our study frequently described barriers related to discoverability, physical access, digitisation, and platform design. These issues influence not only what kinds of discovery research are possible, but also who is able to undertake it.

The literature review underscored the unevenness: while some domains such as digital heritage and Human Computer Interaction ("HCI") are well represented, many analogue or regional collections remain under-described, uncatalogued, or absent from discovery systems. This uneven visibility reproduces long-standing inequities in what counts as health-related evidence.

Survey evidence reinforced these concerns: 68% of respondents reported that lack of access to collections - whether due to location, cataloguing status, format or permissions - was a significant constraint on their work. Respondents in LMICs or working in non-English languages were disproportionately affected. Advisory Board members added that legacy formats (magnetic tape, early digital carriers, obsolete file types) are a critical point of fragility, creating a "silent attrition" of knowledge.

Digitisation remains a double-edged sword. While digital access opens new possibilities, it can also introduce new exclusions - through selective digitisation, loss of context, or platforms that privilege high-status collections. Researchers stressed that digitisation without rich metadata, curatorial voice, and cultural framing risks flattening meaning and undermining discovery.

Analogue collections remain central to many areas of research, yet their sustainability is threatened by declining funding, storage constraints and loss of specialist staff. Interviews and survey responses converged on the need to protect these infrastructures while also building inclusive digital systems. The Advisory Board further stressed the importance of mobile-first, offline-capable, and multilingual design as essential features for global equity - elements rarely implemented in current systems.

Key Insights:

68%

Of survey respondents cited **lack of access** as a major barrier.

Researchers **outside the UK or in LMICs** were particularly disadvantaged.

Access depends heavily on **relationships**: personal networks or local knowledge are key.

Multilingual or mobile-first infrastructure is **rare.**

Discovery infrastructure is therefore **uneven** - often under-described, offline or fragmented.

Implications:

Infrastructure is not neutral: it determines what can be discovered, who can discover it, and how. Discovery research requires equitable, inclusive, and context-rich infrastructures that bridge digital and analogue collections, integrate multilingual design, and preserve fragile media.

Metadata creation, cataloguing, and digitisation should be understood as research-led processes, embedding curatorial expertise and ensuring that overlooked or at-risk collections are visible within global systems. These challenges also represent a significant opportunity: by investing in infrastructures designed around exploratory, interpretive research, the ecosystem can build platforms that expand participation, strengthen equity, and unlock new forms of discovery.

> "If it's not catalogued, it doesn't exist. If it's not digitised, it's as good as gone."
>
> **- Interviewee**

Case Study: Jisc Archives Hub

The Jisc Archives Hub is a national discovery service that aggregates descriptions of archives held across UK universities and other institutions, enabling researchers to search across more than 400 contributing repositories. For health and wellbeing research, it surfaces material ranging from hospital records to family papers and oral histories, providing a crucial gateway to dispersed resources.

The Hub demonstrates both the promise and the limitations of current discovery systems. Its scale and interoperability make it a transformative tool for access, yet interviewees noted that many health-relevant collections remain absent - especially analogue, under-catalogued, or community-held archives. Metadata quality and consistency also vary widely, and English-language dominance poses barriers for global researchers. Survey respondents echoed these concerns, with 62% reporting difficulty in locating relevant collections even when platforms like the Hub exist.

Theme 5: Tools for Discovery - What works, what's missing?

Tools and technologies play a central role in shaping how collections are accessed, interpreted, and used.

Yet many researchers we interviewed described a disconnect between available tools and their research needs-particularly for exploratory, interpretive, or creative work in the humanities and social sciences.

The literature review confirmed this pattern: while computational methods (e.g. natural language processing, image recognition, geospatial mapping) are increasingly cited in digital heritage and HCI domains, uptake is limited, fragmented, and uneven across disciplines. Most publications still describe reliance on generic tools, with very few bespoke systems designed for discovery-led inquiry in the humanities[34].

Survey data reflected this: over 60% of respondents reported relying on generic software tools (e.g. spreadsheets, PDFs, basic search engines) rather than tailored research platforms. Fewer than a quarter had access to technical support or training in computational approaches. Several Advisory Board members noted that discovery research often depends on the ability to move across fragments, ambiguity and uncertainty - features not well supported by conventional catalogue search interfaces or AI-driven platforms optimised for precision.

Some respondents described promising experiments-such as using natural language processing("NLP") to analyse patient narratives or geospatial mapping to connect ecological and medical data-but these were typically serendipitous, reliant on individual initiative, and embedded in one-off projects. Structured institutional provision or cross-sector tool development was rare[35].

Key Insights:

>60%

Of survey respondents **rely on spreadsheets, PDFs and basic search** for their research.

Most available tools are designed for **managing collections not enabling discovery**-led research.

Critical engagement with **Artificial Intelligence** is limited.

Co-design models are cited as **promising** but rate.

There is **limited uptake** of computational methods across the ecosystem.

Implications:

Enabling discovery means investing in research-led tools that reflect the open-ended, interpretive nature of humanities and social science research. This includes: building platforms that support associative searching, ambiguity, and serendipity; embedding technical capacity within research teams; supporting co-design and collaboration across sectors and ensuring equitable access to advanced methods, rather than concentrating innovation in a few well-resourced centres.

> "These systems are built for answers not questions. But what I need are better ways to wander - and find connections I didn't know I was looking for."
>
> **- Interviewee**

Case Study: CLARIAH (The Netherlands)

The CLARIAH (Common Lab Research Infrastructure for the Arts and Humanities)[36] programme, launched in 2014, is one of Europe's largest digital humanities infrastructure initiatives. It provides interoperable tools, datasets, and services for researchers working with textual corpora, audiovisual archives, and museum objects. Its platforms enable computational methods such as semantic search, NLP, geospatial mapping, and data visualisation.

For collections-based research into life, health, and wellbeing, CLARIAH demonstrates the potential of coordinated investment. It lowers barriers for researchers through accessible interfaces and shared standards. Yet its health relevance is indirect, and its tools are not tailored to the exploratory and interpretive practices central to this ecosystem.

Theme 6: Funding the ecosystem - Gaps, risks and possibilities

Funding emerged as both barrier and opportunity.

While some participants had received generous, flexible support, many more described a funding landscape that is fragmented, short-term, and poorly aligned with the temporal and methodological realities of collections research[37].

Discovery research-especially in its early stages-often requires exploratory time, uncertain outcomes, and deep engagement with collections. Several interviewees cited Wellcome's Discovery Awards as rare mechanisms that allow slow, open-ended exploration. The literature review echoed this: many publications highlight the need for long-horizon, risk-tolerant models, yet most projects described were tied to short-term programmes or one-off initiatives.

Survey responses underscored these challenges: 58% of respondents identified short-term or fragmented funding as the most significant constraint on their work. Early-career researchers and those outside major institutions were particularly affected. Collections professionals also reported being excluded from Project Investigator or Co-Investigator status in many schemes, despite their central role in project design and delivery.

Advisory Board members stressed that these structural dynamics also shape equity: community-led archives and institutions in LMICs are frequently ineligible for core research funds, even when their collections underpin international projects. Funding structures that silo heritage from health, or humanities from science, reinforce disciplinary divisions and limit collaborative approaches.

Key Insights:

58%

Of survey respondents cited **fragmented or short-term funding** as their greatest constraint.

Thematic silos in funding **obstruct** interdisciplinary research.

Early career researchers are **disproportionately** disadvantaged.

Collections professionals are **often excluded** from leadership roles in grants.

Community and global south groups face **major eligibility** barriers,

Implications:

A discovery-aligned funding ecosystem would recognise the temporal, relational and collaborative dimensions of collections-based research. This requires: Supporting open-ended inquiry and risk-taking; enabling smaller, flexible grants for exploratory work; allowing collections institutions and professionals to lead research as PIs or Co-Is; coordinating across funders to align heritage, health, and research agendas and expanding eligibility for LMIC and community-led institutions to participate and lead.

> "You can't discover anything new when you're expected to know the answer before the grant begins."
>
> **- Interviewee**

Case Study: Wellcome Discovery Awards

The Wellcome Discovery Awards[38], launched in 2021, fund long-term, curiosity-driven research across the life sciences, social sciences, and humanities. Designed to give researchers greater freedom to pursue novel questions, the awards provide flexible, multi-year funding without narrowly defined outcomes. Several award-holders have used this mechanism to pursue collections-based projects on themes such as trauma, reproductive health, and the history of care - areas that require deep, exploratory engagement with archives, manuscripts, and material culture.

This funding model has been repeatedly cited in our interviews as a rare example of support aligned with the temporal and methodological realities of discovery research. Researchers noted that the freedom to explore and recalibrate questions as projects unfold allows them to work with underused or complex collections in ways that shorter-term or output-driven grants cannot. At the same time, participants stressed that access to such awards is limited, competition is intense, and collections professionals, community researchers, and independent scholars are often excluded due to eligibility rules or lack of institutional backing.

Theme 7: Equity and inclusion - Who discovers, what gets discovered?

Equity, inclusion and representation emerged as critical concerns. Participants emphasised that the structure, content and governance of collections all shape what kinds of discovery are possible-and for whom.

The literature review reinforced this picture. Across the 524 publications analysed, relatively few engaged with disability studies, reproductive justice, racialised health inequities or Indigenous knowledge systems, despite these being areas highlighted in interviews and Advisory Board discussions. This gap points to structural inequities in what is documented, who produces research, and which epistemologies are legitimised.

Many interviewees described systemic barriers faced by researchers from minoritised backgrounds, disabled researchers, those working outside the UK, and those without stable institutional affiliation. Barriers included limited access to funding, exclusion from authorship, and lack of infrastructural support for non-dominant knowledge systems or languages. Survey evidence underscored this: 46% of respondents cited equity and inclusion as the area of greatest unmet need for enabling discovery research.

Collections themselves were also described as sites of exclusion[39]: shaped by colonial legacies, curatorial hierarchies, and metadata frameworks that obscure or silence particular voices. For example, interviewees pointed to cataloguing systems that use outdated racialised terminology, or archives where women's and community contributions are marginalised. Advisory Board members stressed that digital infrastructures often replicate structural inequalities, as digitisation disproportionately focuses on dominant collections and languages.

Survey respondents called for inclusive platform design, multilingual metadata, recognition of non-Western epistemologies, and leadership roles for community-based researchers and institutions. Several described community archiving and co-production as promising models, though underfunded and whose importance remains under-recognised.

Key Insights:

46%

Of survey respondents named **equity and inclusion** as the areas of greatest unmet need.

Digital infrastructures often **replicate structural inequalities** focusing on dominant collections and languages.

Classification systems and metadata schemes can **entrench bias** and erasure.

Participation **remains uneven** - those most affected by health inequities are often least supported to research them.

Implications:

Equity must be treated as structural, not incidental. Enabling discovery research requires systemic change in how collections are built, funded, accessed and governed. This includes: resourcing community-led projects; diversifying leadership and authorship across the ecosystem; embedding inclusive practices at all levels of research and infrastructure and supporting multilingual, multicultural and non-Western epistemologies.

These shifts are not only corrective but generative: by diversifying voices, methods, and leadership, discovery research can surface new questions, produce richer knowledge, and strengthen its global relevance.

> "The problem isn't just what's missing from the archive – it's who's missing from the research."
>
> **- Interviewee**

Case Study: The Digital Library of the Caribbean

The Digital Library of the Caribbean ("dLOC")[51] is a cooperative digital platform launched in 2004, led by the University of Florida in partnership with institutions across the Caribbean and the wider region. It provides open access to digitised cultural, historical, and research materials from over 45 partner organisations, including archives, libraries, universities, and community groups. dLOC's governance model is distinctive: partners contribute materials and expertise while retaining control over decision-making, creating a collaborative structure that foregrounds local authority and multilingual accessibility.

For collections-based discovery research into health and wellbeing, dLOC illustrates how infrastructure can simultaneously confront inequities and expand epistemic visibility. It demonstrates that equitable access to collections is not just a technical matter but a question of governance, authorship, and power. It highlights the need for models where communities and institutions in the Global South have equal authority in shaping discovery infrastructures, ensuring that collections support plural and locally grounded knowledge-making.

Theme 8: Interdisciplinarity - Breaking silos and building collaboration

Collections-based discovery research is inherently interdisciplinary, drawing on history, anthropology, STS, art, design and environmental studies; yet institutional structures often make sustained integration difficult[40].

The literature review echoes this tension: while interdisciplinarity is a recurring theme, only a small proportion of the 524 publications explicitly reported cross-disciplinary collaboration or co-authorship. Most outputs appear in disciplinary silos, with collaboration occurring informally or on a project basis rather than through sustained structures.

Interviewees described how funding schemes, departmental structures, peer-review systems and publishing conventions reinforce boundaries. Hybrid approaches can be marginalised, and speculative or experimental work can be difficult to evaluate.

Survey data showed strong appetite but limited support: 83% of respondents wanted to work across disciplines, yet fewer than 25% felt enabled to do so. Creative and artistic methods-more visible in collections research-remain under-recognised by funders and publishers.

AMCs can also be sites of epistemic tension. Researchers, archivists and curators may hold different assumptions about evidence, value and interpretation. Advisory Board discussions highlighted the rarity of true co-design or co-interpretation models, despite their potential.

Key Insights:

83%

Of survey respondents wanted to work interdisciplinarily, but **less than 25% felt enabled** to do so.

Collections **invite hybrid ways of knowing** - institutional logic less often does.

Creative and **artistic research methods are promising** but under-recognised by formal systems.

Implications:

Enabling discovery in this ecosystem requires structures that support interdisciplinarity and method pluralism. This means: recognising creative and speculative methods as valid contributions to discovery; providing training for early-career researchers in interdisciplinary collaboration; reforming funding and peer review systems to accommodate hybrid work; supporting co-design and co-interpretation spaces where researchers, collections professionals and communities can generate shared insights.

Interdisciplinarity should be seen not only as a challenge but as an engine of innovation: where disciplinary boundaries meet, new methods and new kinds of knowledge emerge. Supporting these intersections will strengthen the ecosystem's capacity for experimentation and discovery.

> "My work is too archival for health funders and too speculative for history panels."
>
> **- Interviewee**

Case Study: Creative Informatics

Creative Informatics is a programme initially funded by the AHRC and Creative Industries Clusters Programme, and led by the University of Edinburgh in partnership with cultural and technology organisations. It provides funding, labs, residencies, and training to support cross-disciplinary innovation at the intersection of data, creativity, and cultural collections. Participants include academics, artists, technologists, and GLAM professionals, working together on projects ranging from immersive storytelling with museum collections to AI-driven reinterpretations of performance archives.

For collections-based health and wellbeing research, Creative Informatics offers a model of how interdisciplinary silos can be bridged through experimental spaces and shared infrastructures. It shows that deliberately funded and structured cross-sector labs can overcome the siloed logics of academia and heritage institutions. It demonstrates the value of creating environments where interpretive, speculative, and technological methods meet, supporting the kind of plural and experimental practice that discovery research requires.

Theme 9: Skills and careers - Building capacity for a new kind of research

Discovery research with AMCs depends on distinctive skillsets: interpretive analysis, material literacy, historical method, cultural sensitivity and cross-sector collaboration.

Interviewees emphasised that opportunities for continual development, cross-sector application and collaborative innovation remain limited, and career pathways are precarious.

The literature review revealed a notable gap: while methodological innovation was widely discussed, only a small fraction of the publications explicitly engaged with training or skills development. Most assumed disciplinary expertise already existed, leaving the process of building capability implicit and undervalued[41].

Interviewees described a disconnect between the skills required for meaningful collections-based research and the training or career structures offered in academic or heritage institutions. Practical experience with analogue collections, critical metadata analysis, or community-engaged methods is often acquired informally-through personal initiative, mentorship, or trial and error.

Collections and archive professionals face parallel challenges. They are frequently excluded from research leadership, lack time or institutional support for research, and have limited access to progression routes that reward innovation or collaboration. This disjuncture was described in interviews as a “double invisibility”: researchers whose work is undervalued within their disciplines, and collections staff whose expertise is undervalued within their institutions.

Survey evidence reinforced these findings. Only 22% of respondents reported access to formal training in collections-based methods, while many described relying on informal mentorship or self-directed learning. Respondents also called for clearer recognition of hybrid roles and cross-sector careers, including opportunities to move between academia, GLAM institutions, and community research.

Key Insights:

22%

Of survey respondents had access to formal **collections-based** training.

Where training is available it is often **project specific** or self-assembled.

Role boundaries between researchers, archivist, curator and practitioner **remain rigid**, limiting collaboration and innovation.

Career progression for hybrid researchers and collections professionals is **poorly supported**.

Implications:

Discovery research depends on deep, sustained and context-sensitive expertise. To build capacity, institutions should: invest in structured training and mentorship for AMC-based methods; recognise and reward hybrid and cross-sector roles and create clear and supported career pathways for both researchers and AMC professionals.

There is a strong appetite and demand for this capacity-building, particularly among early-career researchers and collections professionals. Meeting that demand will not only secure skills for the future but also signal that innovation and hybridity are valued contributions to discovery research.

> "We train people to write articles, not read collections."
>
> **- Interviewee**

Case Study: The American University of Beirut Refugee Archive

The Refugee Archive at the American University of Beirut (AUB)[42] was established to document the lived experiences of displacement, migration, and health among refugee communities in Lebanon and the wider region. The archive integrates oral histories, community-collected artefacts, and grey literature with academic research outputs, creating a resource that is both scholarly and community-owned.

Training and capacity-building are core to the project: students, early-career researchers, and community members are actively involved in cataloguing, metadata development, and interpretive research. For collections-based research into life, health, and wellbeing, the AUB Refugee Archive demonstrates how capacity-building and hybrid skills development can be embedded in archival practice. By offering hands-on training in community-engaged methods, digital preservation, and trauma-informed interviewing, the project has equipped participants with transferable skills often absent from conventional academic or heritage career pathways. Its model also disrupts rigid role boundaries by recognising students, archivists, and community members as co-researchers and co-stewards of knowledge.

Theme 10: Experimentation and risk - Making space for innovation

Collections-based research drives methodological, conceptual and creative innovation. Interviewees described how working with AMCs led to unexpected questions, interdisciplinary collaborations and new forms of output- from immersive installations to speculative narratives to data visualisations.

The literature review reinforces this: although only a subset of the 524 publications explicitly uses the language of experimentation, many are exploratory in method and speculative in orientation. These studies demonstrate how collections can support discovery that challenges disciplinary norms, raises new epistemic questions, and reframes understandings of health and wellbeing.

Yet innovation in this ecosystem is often under-supported and under-recognised. Discovery-driven experimentation - especially when it departs from conventional academic or heritage outputs - can be difficult to fund, publish, or institutionalise. Researchers working with speculative, participatory, or creative methods frequently struggle to find evaluative frameworks that acknowledge the value of their work.

Survey respondents reported frustration that innovation is frequently equated with technology alone, rather than understood as a broader experimental orientation. More than half of respondents said they had pursued experimental work “off the side of the desk” or through unfunded extensions to projects. Those working with participatory or community methods highlighted particular difficulties in securing recognition for outputs such as co-authored metadata, installations, or creative practice.

Interviewees emphasised that innovation emerges through practice: from deep engagement with collections, from transdisciplinary dialogue, and from working through constraints as much as affordances. A few described successful experiments with generative artificial intelligence, immersive storytelling, or community-authored metadata - but these examples were often dependent on individual initiative rather than institutional support.

Key Insights:

>50%

Of survey respondents had pursued experimental work **outside** formal project structures.

Experimental approaches are **difficult to sustain** in outcome-driven funding systems.

Safe spaces for experimentation are **rare** in this ecosystem.

Recognition frameworks **privilege conventional** scholarly outputs.

Implications:

Discovery research thrives when researchers have the freedom to experiment, fail, and reframe questions. Supporting innovation means: funding risk-taking and speculative inquiry; recognising experimental and creative outputs as valid contributions; creating enabling environments - including labs, residencies and peer networks - that allow experimentation to flourish and embedding support for participatory and community-authored forms of innovation.

The ecosystem already contains pockets of innovation-from generative AI experiments to community-authored metadata. The opportunity now is to build on these examples by resourcing environments where experimentation is sustained, visible, and scalable.

> "Innovation isn't a tech add-on. It's about doing something different - asking a question no-one's asked."
>
> **- Interviewee**

Case Study: The Wellcome Hub

The Wellcome Hub (2014-) at Wellcome Collection[43] is a space for transdisciplinary research where people from different backgrounds-such as academia, advocacy, clinical practice and the arts-collaborate on health-related projects. Residencies typically last two to three years and bring together teams to experiment with new forms of inquiry. Projects have ranged from artistic reinterpretations of genomic data to participatory explorations of disability and mental health histories, producing exhibitions, performances, and research outputs that challenge conventional disciplinary framings[44].

The Wellcome Hub demonstrates that innovation requires structured permission to take risks. By resourcing time-bound, transdisciplinary residencies, funders and institutions can enable transformative discovery that would not emerge under conventional funding or career models.

Theme 11: International perspectives - Pluralising knowledge and discovery

Collections-based discovery operates globally, shaped by colonial histories, transnational movements of materials and knowledge, and shared challenges of access, preservation and epistemic justice. International engagement, however, remains uneven, with stark disparities in funding, infrastructure and visibility between the Global North and South.

The literature review confirmed this imbalance. Of the 524 publications analysed, the vast majority were authored by institutions in Europe and North America, with only scattered representation from LMICs or Indigenous-led projects. This echoes a broader pattern: collections sourced from the Global South are often researched, interpreted and published by Global North institutions, with limited recognition or leadership from their communities of origin[45]. Advisory Board members highlighted this as a pressing structural issue, warning that without more equitable frameworks, collections risk reinforcing rather than challenging historical inequities.

Interviewees based outside the UK described persistent challenges in participating in international research: from difficulties accessing digital platforms and paywalled resources, to exclusion from authorship, agenda-setting and funding schemes. Even when collections are sourced from their regions, projects are often designed and led by institutions in the North.

Survey evidence echoed these points: 41% of respondents outside the UK cited funding eligibility as their main barrier, while others noted difficulties with digital infrastructure and language accessibility. Several respondents emphasised the need for long-term, equitable partnerships rather than extractive collaborations.

At the same time, when equitable and well-resourced, international partnerships were described as catalytic. They open up new lines of enquiry, challenge inherited assumptions, and enable plural ways of knowing. Examples cited by interviewees included collaborative projects linking ecological collections to planetary health research, and Indigenous-led archives that reframe what counts as health-related evidence.

Key Insights:

41%

Of survey respondents outside the UK cited **funding eligibility** as their greatest barrier.

Interviewees outside the UK reported **persistent barriers** to inclusion.

Digital access alone **does not equal inclusion** - infrastructure and language matter.

Cross-border collaboration too-often **relies on personal networks** rather than sustainable structures.

Implications:

Discovery research must be global in scope and just in structure. This requires: funding models that enable Global South and Indigenous institutions to lead as well as participate; investment in locally governed infrastructures that reflect community priorities; resourcing multilingual and culturally inclusive digital systems; building long-term, equitable partnerships rather than extractive collaborations.

> "Our collections are used; our histories are told - but we're not part of the process. We're cited, not included."
>
> **- Interviewee**

Case Study: The Modern Endangered Archives Programme

The Modern Endangered Archives Program (MEAP), funded by Arcadia and housed at UCLA Library[46], is an ongoing initiative supporting projects globally to preserve, document, and digitize archival materials at risk. MEAP particularly focuses on collections from under-documented communities and fragile media, including born-digital and 20th/21st-century sources.

MEAP's grant scheme includes several levels: project grants, regional grants, emergency grants, and planning grants. It emphasises open access to digitised collections, careful attention to metadata and archival description, and supports partner institutions to build local capacity in digital curation and preservation.

For AMC-based discovery research, MEAP shows how sustained, global funding models can help surface overlooked collections and support infrastructure, especially where materials are at risk from environmental, social or political pressures. Its focus on capacity building means some of the inequities in access and voice are actively addressed.

Theme 12: Coordination - Why the ecosystem needs glue

Collections-based research on life, health and wellbeing lacks a clearly coordinated ecosystem. While there are strong institutions, communities of practice, and individual exemplars, most interviewees described the landscape as fragmented and under-networked, with no shared agenda, infrastructure, or leadership body to advocate for its development.

The literature review echoed this fragmentation. Of the 524 publications analysed, relatively few referenced shared infrastructures or coordinated frameworks, and when they did, these were concentrated in digital heritage initiatives such as DARIAH in Europe[47] rather than in health-related collections. This indicates that while models exist, they are not yet widely connected to health and wellbeing research. Advisory Board members emphasised the risks of continuing without a centre of gravity: duplication of effort, missed opportunities for cross-learning, and vulnerability to institutional churn.

Interviewees described researchers working in isolation, often unaware of parallel efforts in adjacent disciplines or countries. Collections professionals noted that they are frequently siloed from research strategy, while funders struggle to identify relevant communities because of the ecosystem's interdisciplinary and distributed nature. This limits the capacity of the community to influence policy, secure sustained investment, or build collective capacity.

Survey evidence reinforced this picture. Two-thirds of respondents (66%) agreed that the lack of coordination was a major barrier to maximising the potential of collections-based discovery research. Respondents called for convening platforms, shared vocabularies, open repositories of best practice, and advocacy efforts that could elevate the visibility of this work within wider research systems.

Despite these gaps, both interviewees and Advisory Board members pointed to promising initiatives - including thematic networks, cross-institutional collaboratives, and experimental "labs" - that could serve as foundations for more sustained ecosystem-building. International comparators, such as DARIAH or HathiTrust[48], were cited as proof that coordination infrastructures can succeed when resourced and aligned to community needs.

Key Insights:

66%

Of survey respondents identified **lack of coordination** as a major barrier.

Interviewees consistently **described the ecosystem as fragmented** and under-networked.

Funders, researchers and collections professionals often **operate in silos**.

Implications:

Enabling discovery at scale requires ecosystem-level coordination. This includes: developing shared platforms for collaboration and knowledge exchange; supporting stronger cross-sector alliances that bring together researchers, collections professionals, communities, and funders; establishing resourced leadership capable of advocating for investment and shaping strategy; building on international models (e.g. DARIAH, HathiTrust) while tailoring coordination mechanisms to the specific needs of health and wellbeing research.

> "There is brilliance everywhere, but no centre of gravity."
>
> **- Interviewee**

Case Study: Distributed System of Scientific Collections (DiSSCo)

The Distributed System of Scientific Collections (DiSSCo)[49] is a pan-European research infrastructure that brings together over 170 natural science institutions across 23 countries. Its mission is to unify access to more than 1.5 billion objects in European natural science collections, creating a single, interoperable digital infrastructure. By aligning data standards, governance frameworks, and shared services, DiSSCo provides researchers with a coordinated entry point into otherwise fragmented holdings, enabling large-scale analysis of biodiversity, environmental change, and planetary health.

DiSSCo illustrates how distributed infrastructures can create coherence without centralisation. Rather than replacing local repositories, it builds a federated layer of interoperability that allows institutions of different sizes and capacities to contribute. This model is particularly relevant to the challenges facing collections-based health and wellbeing research, where materials are dispersed and where no single platform could realistically hold them all.

DiSSCo provides a model of how federated infrastructures can give a fragmented ecosystem a shared centre of gravity. It shows that with coordinated investment and governance, distributed collections can be made visible and accessible at scale, while respecting institutional diversity and community priorities.

Theme 13: Signals of change - Where new ideas are building

While this chapter has surfaced many systemic barriers, interviewees and survey respondents also pointed to emerging positive trends and new openings for collections-based discovery research.

These developments span technologies, epistemologies, and sociocultural shifts - offering new tools, audiences, and conceptual frames through which to explore life, health and wellbeing.

The literature review confirms this sense of momentum. Among the 524 publications analysed, new clusters of work have emerged around ecological and planetary health, multispecies ethnography, and digital heritage practices. These clusters are methodologically diverse, blending historical analysis with computational techniques, community engagement, and creative practice. Advisory Board members highlighted these as "signals of change" that demonstrate both innovation and appetite across the ecosystem.

Several participants noted the growing prominence of climate and planetary health research, and the opportunity to connect environmental collections (e.g. land use records, ecological archives, Indigenous knowledge) to questions of ecological and multispecies wellbeing. Others pointed to digital transformation - not just in terms of digitisation, but in how born-digital traces (platforms, metadata, user-generated content) are becoming new raw materials for health-related research.

Speculative and artistic approaches are also gaining ground[50]. Survey respondents identified increased use of creative methods in trauma research, memory studies, and reproductive health.

Finally, community-led collecting and epistemic repair are increasingly recognised as transformative. These practices challenge dominant models of authorship and authority, creating new forms of participation and accountability. The literature review highlighted an uptick in publications explicitly focused on community archives, and reparative methodologies, suggesting that this area is moving from the margins toward the mainstream of collections research.

Key Insights:

524

Publications were analysed, which showed **new clusters of work** in areas like planetary health and multispecies ethnography.

Digital cultures and born-digital traces are **emerging** as both objects and tools of research.

Creative, speculative and affective methods are **increasingly recognised** as valid contributions.

Community archives and epistemic repair are **gaining visibility**.

Implications:

These developments represent fertile ground for future discovery research. They expand conceptions of what collections are, how they can be used, and what forms of knowledge they can support. Funders and institutions have an opportunity to nurture these openings - not by prematurely formalising them, but by creating enabling environments where experimentation, pluralism, and community-led practice can flourish.

Momentum already exists across ecological inquiry, digital traces, speculative methods, and community repair. The opportunity is to sustain and connect these signals of change so that they become durable foundations for the ecosystem's evolution.

> "What's emerging isn't just new methods - it's new sensibilities and new ways of being in relation to the archive."
>
> **- Interviewee**

Case Study: Toxic Legacies Project

The Toxic Legacies Project[51] is a community-university partnership in Yellowknife, Canada, addressing the long-term environmental and health impacts of arsenic contamination from the Giant Mine. Funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC), the project brings together Indigenous communities, scientists, historians, and policy actors to consider how toxic materials are remembered, remediated, and governed over time.

For discovery research, the project signals how collections are expanding beyond traditional archives to include community testimony, ecological data, and Indigenous epistemologies. It demonstrates how plural sources can be combined to confront global challenges like climate change, environmental justice, and planetary health.

Conclusion

The thematic insights in this chapter reflect both the richness and the precarity of collections-based research in life, health and wellbeing. The literature review shows distributed activity across archaeology, museology, digital heritage, environmental health and medical humanities, yet fragmentation in infrastructure and recognition. Interviews, surveys and Advisory Board discussions reinforce consistent concerns about access, equity, skills and funding, while pointing to momentum in ecological inquiry, creative practice and community-led repair.

> "What we see is potential everywhere, but it's fragile. Without investment, the connections can't hold."
>
> **- Interviewee**

The analysis underscores that archives, manuscripts and material culture already function as infrastructures of discovery, but remain under-recognised, under-coordinated and under-resourced. Moving from dispersed activity to transformative impact will require sustained coordination, investment and inclusive practice.

These findings provide the empirical grounding for the recommendations that follow. They highlight not only what is missing or under pressure, but also where there is appetite and opportunity. **Chapters 5** builds from this evidence, outlining actions that could support the ecosystem to realise its role as a dynamic and equitable research infrastructure for discovery in life, health and wellbeing.

5.0 Fifteen Recommendations for Change



5.0 Fifteen Recommendations for Change

This chapter sets out a portfolio of recommendations designed to enable change across a distributed and evolving research ecosystem.

These are independent proposals developed by Human Economics and tested with the sector through interviews, survey responses, Advisory Board discussions, and literature synthesis. They build directly on the barriers, challenges and opportunities identified in Chapter 4.

Each of the fifteen recommendations offers a potential point of entry for funders, institutions and researchers. They are not intended to prescribe a single path or centralised programme. Instead, they represent contingent and indicative options: practical levers that could be activated in different combinations depending on context, budget, and appetite. Their purpose is to support, extend, and amplify work already underway across the ecosystem, while providing strategic clarity on where investment and coordination would make the greatest difference.

The evidence presented in **Chapter 4** points to the need for more distributed forms of leadership, funding and infrastructure development - recognising that community archives, regional collections, and Global South institutions are critical to the vitality of discovery research. A sustainable and inclusive ecosystem depends not only on digital infrastructure and funding, but also on the expertise of archivists, curators and collections professionals.

The recommendations taken together aim to unlock the latent potential of collections to act as infrastructures of discovery for life, health, and wellbeing, and to embed sustained investment and innovation across the sector.

Recommendations overview: Types and purposes

The fifteen recommendations presented below are grouped into three tiers, reflecting the scale and type of intervention they represent.

This typology emerged from the iterative synthesis of survey data, interviews, Advisory Board input, and literature review. Each recommendation is grounded in the evidence base described in Chapter 4, with further mapping in Chapter 6.

Field Development Recommendations (FDR) - Small-scale, catalytic interventions that build early-stage capacity, participation and visibility across the ecosystem, especially for new or underrepresented participants. FDRs are designed to seed new collaborations, surface unmet needs, and enable emergent capabilities.

Infrastructure & Enabler Recommendations (IER) - Infrastructure and practice-based interventions that address foundational constraints. IERs are designed to strengthen the underlying systems-technical, organisational, and ethical-that enable discovery research.

Programme & Policy Recommendations (PPR) - High-level, structural actions that reorient governance, investment and research framing. PPRs focus on shaping systemic conditions and anchoring collections-based research within Wellcome's Discovery Research strategy and beyond.

These tiers are not sequential. They operate in parallel and can be activated independently or in combination depending on context. Importantly, they are indicative rather than prescriptive. Effective interventions must be adaptive, distributed and internationally inclusive, not centralised or one-size-fits-all.

How these recommendations were developed

All candidate recommendations were derived from an iterative process that combined multiple streams of evidence and validation:

Literature review: An AI-assisted review of 524 publications (see Chapter 2) provided a baseline of concepts, methods, and opportunity areas. This highlighted clusters around oral history, environmental archives, and community-led approaches, and revealed gaps in skills development and coordination.

Survey: 86 valid responses offered breadth across geographies and career stages. Quantitative patterns were particularly strong on infrastructure, funding, and equity. For example, 66% of respondents cited lack of coordination as a barrier; 58% pointed to fragmented funding; 46% identified equity and inclusion as the greatest unmet need.

Interviews: 32 in-depth interviews provided depth and lived experience. Interviewees emphasised, for instance, the fragility of analogue formats ("if it's not catalogued, it doesn't exist"), the invisibility of collections professionals in funding structures, and the frustration of early-career researchers expected to deliver outputs before discovery had even begun.

Advisory Board (AB): The AB met three times and provided structured feedback on framing documents, draft recommendations, and emerging findings. Members stressed the need for investment in human infrastructure (archivists, curators, community custodians), raised urgency around born-digital fragility and cyber risks, and advised that recommendations should be seen as contingent options, not fixed prescriptions.

Why 15 recommendations?

While Chapter 4 sets out 13 thematic areas, these do not map one-to-one onto recommendations. Some recommendations address multiple themes (for example, Discovery Labs connect to innovation, interdisciplinarity, and equity), while others target cross-cutting enablers (such as legal and ethical guidance).

In refining the longlist of 37 candidate ideas, we prioritised actions that:

- Enhance discovery research to understand life, health, and wellbeing, in line with the overall purpose of the Study;
- Address foundational and widely reported barriers identified through fieldwork and literature;
- Are feasible and actionable across different parts of the ecosystem;
- Enable the emergence of a more connected, inclusive, and impactful research ecosystem.

Through this process, a longlist of 37 candidate ideas was refined to a portfolio of 15 recommendations across the three tiers: Field Development, Infrastructure & Enabler, and Programme & Policy.

Each recommendation is mapped back to the themes it builds on, and includes a rationale, relevant exemplars, and indicative delivery pathways alongside summarising the barriers, challenges, and opportunities they respond to.

What the recommendations address

Each recommendation in this portfolio addresses specific barriers, challenges, or opportunities identified during fieldwork.

- **Barriers** are structural conditions that constrain discovery research - from fragmented infrastructure to exclusionary funding systems.
- **Challenges** reflect problems of practice, interpretation, capacity, or coordination that make discovery difficult or inaccessible.
- **Opportunities** are latent potentials within the ecosystem - including underused collections, emergent communities, or adjacent trends - that could be unlocked with targeted action.

The specific barriers, challenges and opportunities are identified below each of the recommendations to help connect the thematic analysis and proposed solutions together.

Field development recommendations

Recommendation 1: Foundations and futures - entry points for a new field

What it is:

Create clear and accessible entry points into collections-based research in life, health and wellbeing. Commission introductory essays, training pathways, and early-career outreach to build visibility, shared language, and foundational understanding of this distributed and evolving ecosystem.

Why it's needed:

This study has highlighted a widespread lack of visibility, shared language, and early-stage support for researchers and practitioners interested in working with archives, manuscripts and material culture collections in health and wellbeing research.

Survey evidence confirms this: 71% of respondents called for clearer entry pathways and training opportunities, with many noting that they "arrived in the ecosystem by accident." Early-career researchers in particular stressed the absence of structured routes into the work.

Advisory Board members emphasised that foundational resources must be plural and inclusive, recognising traditional knowledge systems, community collections, and regional histories as equal entry points alongside national or digital resources.

Barriers, Challenges and Opportunities addressed:

Type	Theme	Issue Addressed
Barrier	Theme 9: Skills & Careers	No formal pathways for early-career or interdisciplinary entry
Challenge	Theme 8: Interdisciplinarity	Lack of shared language across sectors and disciplines
Opportunity	Theme 7: Equity & Inclusion	Expands access for new researchers and diverse knowledge systems

How to do it:

Commission a short, accessible essay series.

Launch an annual summer school and online courses.

Develop an evaluation framework to assess uptake.

What it builds on:

DARIAH-EU: Its training and education programmes, provide shared entry points for humanities scholars into digital and collections-based methods

Timeframe:

Short-term. 1-2 years.

Delivery actors:

Training providers, cultural institutions. Co-designed with funders and professional bodies.

Expected Impact:

Lower barriers to entry for new researchers.

Greater visibility and legitimacy of the field.

Enhanced interdisciplinary understanding.

Recommendation 2: Discovery labs and methods exchange

What it is:

Support a series of cross-sector Discovery Labs and Methods Exchanges that bring together researchers, collections professionals, and technologists to experiment with new approaches to collections-based discovery research. These labs would serve as exploratory spaces to test ideas, trial methods, and build capacity for collaborative and interdisciplinary enquiry, while making innovation visible and shareable across the ecosystem.

Why it's needed:

Fieldwork participants consistently highlighted the lack of structured opportunities for experimentation across sectors. Many described working in isolation, with little time, space or permission to explore new interpretive, digital or participatory methods. This was strongly reinforced by survey data with 64% reporting no structured opportunities. Advisory Board discussions talked about the need for experimental test-beds, and repeated interview testimony mentioned the absence of institutional support for risk-taking.

Survey data expanded this: more than half of respondents (52%) reported pursuing experimental work without formal funding, often in precarious or early-career contexts. Interviews reinforced that collaboration between curators and researchers tends to happen late in the project lifecycle, if at all.

Advisory Board members stressed that innovation is integral to discovery, not optional, but requires safe spaces where experimentation - and even failure - is possible. They also noted that labs must be designed to include community voices and non-academic participants, avoiding a narrow researcher-only model.

Barriers, Challenges and Opportunities addressed:

Type	Theme	Issue Addressed
Barrier	Theme 4: Discovery Systems	No time, space, or mandate for cross-sector methodological testing
Challenge	Theme 10: Experiment & Risk	Fragmented experimentation and low visibility of emerging practices
Opportunity	Theme 12: Coordination	Builds networks across disciplines and institutional roles

How to do it:

Provide microgrants to support informal networks.

Support exploratory research in emerging domains.

Embed indigenous, traditional and community knowledge systems in labs.

What it builds on:

Digital Scholarship and Creatives Spaces, University of Michigan: Media labs and makerspaces where researchers, technologists and librarians co-create experimental projects.

Timeframe:

Short-to-medium term. 2-3 years.

Delivery actors:

Interdisciplinary research centres, GLAM Labs. Supported by university departments and cultural infrastructure bodies.

Expected Impact:

Reduces isolation by creating shared R&D spaces.

Surfaces and tests early-stage methodologies.

Strengthens the ecosystem by heightening the visibility of innovation.

Recommendation 3: Training pathways and micro-credentials

What it is:

Develop modular, flexible training offers - including short online courses, micro-credentials, and skills exchanges - to build capacity for collections-based research on life, health and wellbeing. These should target researchers, collections professionals, and cross-sector practitioners at different career stages with recognition that skills development is a shared need across the ecosystem.

Why it's needed:

This study has highlighted a widespread lack of structured training and recognition for the distinctive skills required in this ecosystem - including critical cataloguing, interpretive analysis of material sources, collaborative methods, and ethical engagement with sensitive collections.

Survey results show that only 22% of respondents reported access to formal training in collections-based methods. Many relied on self-teaching or informal mentorship. Interviews reinforced this and Advisory Board members added that this gap undermines both research and workforce sustainability, stressing that training should bridge roles (researcher <-> archivist <-> curator <->community practitioner) rather than reinforce them.

Barriers, Challenges and Opportunities addressed:

Type	Theme	Issue Addressed
Barrier	Theme 9: Skills & Careers	Lack of structured, recognised training for key competencies
Challenge	Theme 9: Skills & Careers	Informal skills often invisible in hiring and evaluation systems
Opportunity	Theme 11: International Perspectives	Supports widely accessible, scalable learning

How to do it:

Design a modular curriculum focussed on core collections competencies.

Offer recognition through badges or micro-credentials.

Embed peer-to-peer exchange and mentorship alongside content.

What it builds on:

Digital Preservation Coalition's Novice to Know How: A modular training platform that introduces essential digital preservation skills.

Timeframe:

Medium term. 2-4 years.

Delivery actors:

National training consortia, higher education providers and independent research organisations.

Expected Impact:

Builds foundational capacity across sectors for collections based discovery research.

Makes skills visible and transferable.

Increases equity and global participation by offering scalable, low-cost formats.

Recommendation 4: Global Discovery fellowships and partnerships

What it is:

Establish a rolling programme of international fellowships to support discovery research using collections related to life, health and wellbeing. These should be open not only to academic researchers, but also to independent researchers, community leaders, curators, artists and practitioners. Funding criteria should prioritise inclusion, equitable access, and support for community-led and experimental approaches. The model should offer flexible durations, delivery modes, and eligible outputs, and include a micro-grants stream for small-scale, rapid-turnaround activities such as workshops, training access, and scoping visits.

Why it's needed:

Fieldwork highlighted consistent barriers to authorship, access, and funding for researchers and practitioners outside the UK and traditional academic structures. Interviewees in the Global South described systemic exclusion: "Our collections are used; our histories are told - but we're not part of the process. We're cited, not included." Others emphasised that fellowship criteria often presume institutional affiliation or outputs shaped by Global North research norms.

Survey data reinforced this picture: 41% of non-UK respondents cited funding eligibility as their greatest barrier, alongside infrastructural and language constraints. Advisory Board members agreed that redistributing leadership and authorship is essential to building a sustainable and equitable ecosystem. They noted that programmes must avoid extractive models of mobility, and instead support locally governed research and reciprocal exchange.

Barriers, Challenges and Opportunities addressed:

Type	Theme	Issue Addressed
Barrier	Theme 11: International Perspectives	Structural barriers to leadership from Global South institutions
Challenge	Theme 7: Equity & Inclusion	Researchers are cited but not included in global knowledge systems
Opportunity	Theme 6: Funding the Ecosystem	Unlocks new frameworks for health and wellbeing interpretation

How to do it:

Fund 6-12 month fellowships hosted by Global South institutions.

Introduce micro-grants for short-term high-impact interventions.

Support non-textual, multi-lingual and locally governed outputs.

What it builds on:

British Museum International Training Programme: Bringing early-career museum professionals together for a programme of training, networking and collaborative research.

Timeframe:

Medium-to-long term. 3-5 years.

Delivery actors:

Led by host institutions in the Global South; supported by research networks and foundations. Co-funded by global and regional consortia.

Expected Impact:

Expands leadership in collections-based research.

Enables equitable access to research funding.

Surfaces new approaches, narratives and interpretive models.

Infrastructure and Enabler Recommendations

Theme 5: Strengthen oral history collections for health and wellbeing research

What it is:

Support sustainable access to oral history collections related to life, health and wellbeing by consolidating, enhancing and raising the visibility of existing tools, standards and training resources.
This is not about creating new infrastructure, but about targeted investment in partnerships, training access, and digitisation support to extend and strengthen what already exists.

Why it's needed:

Oral history offers unique insights into lived experience, care, and health systems, but remains underutilised due to fragmentation, variable preservation, and inconsistent metadata. 37% of survey respondents named oral history as one of the most underused collection types for health-related discovery.

Interviewees described at-risk collections languishing uncatalogued or in analogue formats, while community organisations stressed the lack of capacity to preserve their own oral records.

Barriers, Challenges and Opportunities addressed:

Type	Theme	Issue Addressed
Barrier	Theme 5: Tools for Discovery	Oral histories remain uncatalogued and hard to access
Challenge	Theme 4: Systems for Discovery	Uncertainty around rights, ethics, and trauma-informed use
Opportunity	Theme 1: Breadth of Use	Unlocks rich sources of health insight through ethical engagement

How to do it:

Fund 6-12 month fellowships hosted by Global South institutions.

Introduce micro-grants for short-term high-impact interventions.

Support non-textual, multi-lingual and locally governed outputs.

What it builds on:

Oral History Society's guidance and training: The initiative could build on these and other extant programmes from the British Library or the Oral History Metadata Synchroniser.

Timeframe:

Short-to-Medium. 1-3 years.

Delivery actors:

Delivered via partnerships with current providers. Co-designed with community archives and health-focused NGOs.

Expected Impact:

Improves discoverability and ethical re-use of oral history materials.

Prevents the loss of fragile collections.

Strengthens trust between researchers and source communities.

Recommendation 6: Tools for born-digital preservation in research Contexts

What it is:

Support the sustainable use of existing open-source tools and training for preserving born-digital materials used in life, health and wellbeing research. This recommendation focuses on scaling adoption, localising training, and embedding capacity in under-resourced contexts, rather than creating new tools.

Why it's needed:

Born-digital materials - emails, websites, social media, datasets - are now critical components of the research ecosystem. Yet their preservation remains patchy, technically complex, and highly uneven across institutions[77]. Survey responses and AB discussions confirmed this as the most pressing technical barrier.

Survey data showed that 42% of respondents identified digital fragility and obsolescence as a major risk to their research, while only a minority reported confidence in digital preservation workflows. Interviews confirmed this picture: researchers and curators described relying on ad hoc storage solutions or outdated file formats.

Advisory Board members raised the cyberattack on the British Library as a wake-up call, stressing that digital resilience is not a niche technical issue but a systemic research risk. They argued that tools and training must reach not only well-funded institutions but also Global South partners where the risks of data loss are greatest.

Barriers, Challenges and Opportunities addressed:

Type	Theme	Issue Addressed
Barrier	Theme 4: Systems for Discovery	Born-digital materials risk loss due to lack of tools and strategy
Challenge	Theme 5: Tools for Discovery	Small or community institutions lack preservation capabilities
Opportunity	Theme 2: Rethinking Relevance	Preserves key records of modern health experience and activism

How to do it:

Convene a taskforce to adapt existing tools for health- and wellbeing related collections.

Support localisation of guidance for different geographies and languages.

Pilot adoption with community archives and LMIC partners.

What it builds on:

UNESCO's Persist Project: Develops global policy frameworks for digital preservation and shows the importance of aligning technical tooling with governance and policy.

Timeframe:

Medium-term. 2-3 years.

Delivery actors:

Preservation networks and open-source developers, working with regional hubs.

Expected Impact:

Increases resilience against data loss and digital obsolescence.

Improves equity of access to preservation skills and tools.

Embeds sustainability in community and LMIC

Recommendation 7: Create regional support hubs for community-linked health archives

What it is:

Enable locally grounded collaboration between community-based groups, researchers, and memory institutions by supporting a flexible model of regional and thematic hubs for health-related archives. These hubs would not be mandatory structures, but light-touch coordination points that help resource-limited groups connect to expertise, infrastructure, and funding while retaining local authority.

Why it's needed:

Many grassroots and community health archives operate outside formal heritage systems, often relying on volunteer labour or precarious funding. Interviewees emphasised that engagement with these archives depends on trust, local presence, and long-term relationships that cannot be imposed from the centre.

Survey evidence highlighted this systemic fragility: 46% of respondents identified equity and inclusion as the ecosystem's greatest unmet need, and community archives were repeatedly cited as both high-value and highly vulnerable. Advisory Board members agreed, warning that without regional support structures, community collections risk being further marginalised by digital and funding silos. They stressed that hubs must be locally led and co-governed, designed to extend sustainability and visibility without replicating top-down models.

Barriers, Challenges and Opportunities addressed:

Type	Theme	Issue Addressed
Barrier	Theme 4: Systems for Discovery	Health-related archives held by communities are unsupported
Challenge	Theme 5: Tools for Discovery	Lack of preservation frameworks for informal or grassroots archives
Opportunity	Theme 7: Equity and Inclusion	Protects and elevates marginalised voices and care histories

How to do it:

Establish hubs hosted by regional anchor institutions co-governed with community partners.

Provide embedded training and mentorship by local heritage practicioners.

Fund flexible activities governed by local needs.

What it builds on:

South African History Archive: Which shows how regionally rooted institutions can preserve politically sensitive collections whilst supporting activist use.

Timeframe:

Medium-to-Lond term. 3-6 years

Delivery actors:

Preservation networks and open-source developers, working with regional hubs.

Expected Impact:

Increases resilience against data loss and digital obsolescence.

Improves equity of access to preservation skills and tools.

Embeds sustainability in community and LMIC contexts.

Recommendation 8: Prototype a cross-institution discovery layer for researcher access

What it is:

Develop and test a lightweight, interoperable discovery interface to improve access to analogue, hybrid, and underrepresented collections relevant to health and wellbeing research. The prototype should prioritise inclusivity, supporting multilingual vocabularies, interpretive search, and visibility for smaller and community-held collections.

Why it's needed:

Discovery is consistently identified as the single biggest technical barrier to collections-based research. Metadata sits in institutional silos; platforms are often designed for collection management or public browsing rather than interpretive research. 62% of survey respondents reported difficulty in finding relevant collections as a primary barrier to their work.

Interviewees described discovery as a "black box," dependent on insider knowledge or luck. As one researcher explained: "If you don't know what to call it, or where to look, it might as well not exist." Advisory Board members reinforced this, warning that existing infrastructures privilege well-catalogued, text-based, or English-language collections - marginalising analogue, non-digital, or community-held materials. They emphasised that any discovery layer must therefore be inclusive by design, reflecting diverse vocabularies and ensuring visibility for collections beyond the largest institutions.

Type	Theme	Issue Addressed
Barrier	Theme 4: Systems for Discovery	Current platforms obscure analogue, multilingual, and hybrid content
Challenge	Theme 5: Tools for Discovery	Fragmented systems require manual navigation and interpretation
Opportunity	Theme 1: Breadth of Use	Opens up comparative, multilingual and exploratory access pathways

How to do it:

Fund prototype development of a cross-institutional discovery interface for health and wellbeing collections.

Prioritise holdings from small institutions, non-English collections and LMIC partners

Ensure ethical metadata practises.

What it builds on:

JISC Archives Hub: Which aggregates metadata from hundreds of UK and European repositories, enabling users to search across disparate institutional systems.

Timeframe:

Medium term. 2-4 years

Delivery actors:

Led by infrastructure providers working with GLAM institutions and digital platform developers

Expected Impact:

Improves access to hidden, analogue and marginalised collections.

Enhances interoperability at institutional and national scale.

Supports exploratory, thematic and multilingual research methods.

Recommendation 9: Launch a legal and ethical toolkit for collections use in health contexts

What it is:

Develop a modular legal and ethical toolkit, accompanied by targeted training, to support the responsible use, reuse, and stewardship of collections intersecting with health, care, and lived experience.

Why it's needed:

Researchers and collections professionals consistently reported uncertainty in navigating legal and ethical issues - particularly when working with sensitive, hybrid, or community-held materials. This includes questions of consent, trauma, data protection, Indigenous data sovereignty, and culturally appropriate access.

Survey findings highlight the scale of the challenge: 47% of respondents cited legal or ethical uncertainty as a significant barrier to their work. Interviews confirmed this: "We've had to halt projects because no one knew if we were even allowed to use the material," one researcher explained. Advisory Board members echoed these concerns, noting that patchwork institutional policies create inconsistency and risk, and stressing the importance of practical, accessible resources co-designed with researchers, archivists, and communities.

Type	Theme	Issue Addressed
Barrier	Theme 4: Systems for Discovery	Lack of clear guidance around consent, licensing and rights
Challenge	Theme 9: Skills and Careers	Fragmented or inconsistent practices increase risk for researchers
Opportunity	Theme 3: Research Value	Enables responsible reuse of sensitive materials with clarity

How to do it:

Commision a landscape review of legal and ethical guidance.

Develop modular resources including flowcharts, definitions and case scenarios.

Ensure inclusion of LMIC and non-Western perspectives on data rights.

What it builds on:

GLAM-E Lab Open Toolkit: Which helps navigate legal and rights issues in open access collections.

Timeframe:

Short-to-Medium term. 1-3 years

Delivery actors:

Legal research centres and institutional ethics offices. Co-designed with rights organisations and community partners.

Expected Impact:

Improves access to hidden, analogue and marginalised collections.

Enhances interoperability at institutional and national scale.

Supports exploratory, thematic and multilingual research methods.

Recommendation 10: Safeguard at-risk collections of health and wellbeing significance

What it is:

Support the identification, preservation, and long-term accessibility of at-risk collections relating to health and wellbeing. These may include collections in danger due to conflict, institutional closure, climate threat, political suppression, or lack of archival infrastructure. The focus should be on enabling stewardship rooted in justice, care, and equity - including but not limited to decolonisation frameworks.

Why it's needed:

Across interviews and surveys, practitioners expressed urgent concern about fragile, uncatalogued, or endangered collections - particularly those reflecting marginalised communities or historically suppressed health experiences. 39% of survey respondents identified analogue fragility as the most urgent risk, and several interviewees warned that entire health-relevant archives are being lost through institutional downsizing or neglect.

As one participant put it: "Every month we hear of collections literally being thrown out - not because they're not valuable, but because there's no one left to care for them." Advisory Board members stressed that this is not just a Global South issue: UK local authority and voluntary-sector archives are equally at risk, with austerity and climate pressures accelerating loss. They argued that safeguarding must be distributed and anticipatory, not reactive, combining small-scale local interventions with international frameworks for crisis contexts.

Type	Theme	Issue Addressed
Barrier	Theme 7: Equity & Inclusion	Health-relevant collections lost due to conflict, climate, or crisis
Challenge	Theme 12: Coordination	No shared protocols for emergency response or ethical intervention
Opportunity	Theme 1: Breadth of Use	Protects endangered knowledge in unstable contexts

How to do it:

Provide targeted grants for cataloguing, conservation and preservation planning.

Embed ethical review processes that foreground community needs.

Include climate vulnerability and digital obsolescence in risk assessments.

What it builds on:

Wellcome's Research Resources Awards: Which funded projects to catalogue, digitise and preserve health-related collections.

Timeframe:

Medium-to-Long term. 3-6 years

Delivery actors:

Delivered via open calls and targeted partnerships. Coordinated with preservation bodies in crisis-affected regions.

Expected Impact:

Prevents irreversible loss of collections.

Promotes equity by surfacing hidden narratives.

Supports ethical stewardship and builds resilience into health infrastructures.

Recommendation 11: Create a cross-sector coordination-hub for collections-based Discovery research

What it is:

Establish a cross-sector coordination hub to support collections-based discovery research across institutions, regions, and domains. This hub would connect researchers, collections professionals, funders, and policy actors to support collaboration, knowledge exchange, and shared preservation responses - particularly in contexts of risk, marginalisation, or underinvestment.

Why it's needed:

Fragmentation emerged as one of the strongest themes across the evidence base, reflecting the survey's top-identified barrier (fragmentation, 72%). Two-thirds of survey respondents (66%) identified lack of coordination as a major barrier to their work. Interviews described an ecosystem of "brilliance everywhere, but no centre of gravity." One researcher observed: "We all reinvent the wheel in our own corner - but no one is funded to join the dots."

Type	Theme	Issue Addressed
Barrier	Theme 4: Systems of Discovery	No mechanism to align funders, platforms, researchers, and GLAMs
Challenge	Theme 12: Coordination	Lack of shared vocabulary or coordination limits influence and scale
Opportunity	Theme 12: Coordination	Enables collective strategy, coherence, and advocacy across sectors

How to do it:

Develop an emergency response protocol.

Create a rapid-response platform.

Connect to international infrastructures to align standards and partnerships.

What it builds on:

Digital Preservation Coalition: Which began as a UK-membership body but grew into an international hub linking funders, institutions and heritage organisations.

Timeframe:

Medium-to-Long term. 3-5 years

Delivery actors:

Delivered via open calls and targeted partnerships. Coordinated with preservation bodies in crisis-affected regions.

Expected Impact:

Increases survival of at-risk knowledge and materials.

Enables ethically grounded preservation in unstable environments.

Supports research continuity.

Programme and Policy Recommendations

Recommendation 12: Create a long-term Discovery research programme anchored in collections

What it is:

Establish a multi-year, interdisciplinary research programme that positions archives, manuscripts and material culture collections as critical infrastructures of discovery research into life, health and wellbeing. The programme should support foundational enquiry, cross-sector collaboration, and experimental methods, with a focus on underexplored collections and plural knowledge systems. It must also be open to non-academic participants-including independent researchers, artists, collections professionals, and community organisations-alongside universities.

Why it's needed:

Survey results and interviews highlighted frustration with the short-term, projectised funding models that currently dominate. 58% of survey respondents identified short-term funding as the single greatest barrier to their work. Early-career researchers described being unable to pursue exploratory engagement with collections because funding schemes demanded predefined outcomes.

This recommendation directly addresses barriers identified in the undervaluation of discovery work, exclusion of collections professionals and community researchers from leadership, and lack of career pathways. It anchors curiosity-driven, foundational enquiry in real materials and plural epistemologies.

Type	Theme	Issue Addressed
Barrier	Theme 12: Coordination	No long-term home for collections-based discovery research
Challenge	Theme 10: Experiment & Risk	Outcome-driven frameworks inhibit exploratory or interpretive work
Opportunity	Theme 1: Breadth of Use	Supports plural methods, foundational inquiry, and long-horizon work

How to do it:

Launch a programme dedicated to collections-based discovery research in health and wellbeing.

Design inclusive eligibility for community archives and non-university institutions.

Develop evaluation frameworks recognising plural outputs.

What it builds on:

Mellon Foundation's Humanities in Place Which provides a precedent for sustained long-horizon funding of interdisciplinary projects.

Timeframe:

Long term. 5-10 years

Delivery actors:

Delivered through interdisciplinary consortia including collections institutions and community stakeholders.

Expected Impact:

Signals long-term commitment to collections-based discovery.

Builds capacity, confidence and career pathways.

Fosters methodological innovation and breaks silos.

Recommendation 13: Build a shared national and international infrastructure

What it is:

Support the development of shared infrastructure for collections-based discovery research - including tools, data standards, platforms, and governance models - to enable collaboration and scale across institutions, sectors, and borders. This should follow a federated model that links existing systems, fills critical gaps, and ensures participation by smaller institutions and Global South partners, rather than creating a single centralised platform.

Why it's needed:

Fragmentation of infrastructure was among the most consistent findings across our evidence base. 62% of survey respondents identified "difficulty discovering collections" as a major barrier, and 41% highlighted lack of interoperability between platforms. Interviews reinforced this: "We are forever reinventing the wheel - each project builds a bespoke system that vanishes when the funding runs out."

Advisory Board members echoed these concerns, warning that UK provision is overly concentrated in a few very large institutions, while regional, community, and LMIC collections are left invisible. They stressed that shared infrastructure must be inclusive and layered: capable of connecting catalogues, standards, and training, while embedding ethical and legal safeguards (e.g. GDPR, Indigenous data sovereignty, cyber-resilience).

Type	Theme	Issue Addressed
Barrier	Theme 5: Tools for Discovery	Disconnected platforms and tools limit access, reuse and coordination
Challenge	Theme 12: Coordination	No shared roadmap or metadata framework for collections-based research
Opportunity	Theme 4: Systems of Discovery	Enables inclusive and scalable infrastructure for discovery research

How to do it:

Map existing national and international infrastructure.

Identify areas where investment could generate shared benefits.

Facilitate a working group to agree shared goals.

What it builds on:

Towards a National Collection: UKRI's programme which invested in projects to test new models of interoperability, data sharing and researcher access.

Timeframe:

Long term. 5-10 years

Delivery actors:

Lead by infrastructure consortia in collaboration with GLAM platforms and international partners..

Expected Impact:

Reduces duplication and increases accessibility of tools and content.

Enables more inclusive participation in collections-based research.

Provides long-term foundations for experimentation and collaboration.

Recommendation 14: Embed collections-based research in global health and environmental agendas

What it is:

Position collections-based research as a vital contributor to major health and environmental challenges by integrating it into relevant policy, funding, and research agendas. This includes surfacing historical, cultural, and systems-level insights that can inform present-day responses to climate change, pandemics, mental health, food systems, and global inequality - while preserving space for critical and speculative work.

Why it's needed:

Collections provide critical longitudinal and cultural perspectives on health, but are often absent from global health and environmental policy frameworks. Survey data showed that 43% of respondents felt their work was "invisible" to policy audiences, and interviewees repeatedly highlighted the disconnection between cultural research and strategic funding agendas. As one put it: "Our work shows how communities adapt to crises - but unless it's framed as biomedical, it doesn't count."

Advisory Board members agreed that embedding collections into global challenges requires both advocacy and exemplars. They warned that this alignment must not instrumentalise collections, but preserve space for critical and speculative work that challenges dominant framings.

Type	Theme	Issue Addressed
Barrier	Theme 6: Funding the Ecosystem	Health and climate funding often omits historical and cultural insight
Challenge	Theme 3: Research Value	Research value not framed legibly within global challenge calls
Opportunity	Theme 2: Rethinking Relevance	Positions collections as foundational to ecological and health insight

How to do it:

Partner with university policy units to build platforms for engagement.

Fund pilot projects to surface historical and material dimensions of health-related challenges.

Embed cultural and historical analysis in evaluation frameworks.

What it builds on:

Belmont Forum: A multilateral funding consortium embedding humanities and social science in global environmental challenges.

Timeframe:

Medium-to-Long term. 3-6 years

Delivery actors:

Lead by challenge funders and global consortia. Global South institutions engaged as equal research leads.

Expected Impact:

Elevates the relevance of collections-research to global challenges

Creates new funding pathways.

Broadens the conceptual framing of health research.

Recommendation 15: Shape the use of AI in collections-based Discovery research

What it is:

Develop a programme to explore and shape the role of artificial intelligence in collections-based research, focusing on discovery, interpretation, and infrastructure. This should support both researcher-led and collections-led experimentation with AI tools, ensure ethical and epistemically diverse use of AI, and build capacity across the sector to apply AI in inclusive and context-sensitive ways.

Why it's needed:

AI is increasingly used to extract, generate, and link knowledge - but in heritage and research contexts it raises complex challenges of bias, opacity, and misinterpretation. Survey results showed 38% of respondents were interested in using AI tools but lacked confidence in how to apply them responsibly, while 22% had already experimented with machine learning or Natural Language Processingtechniques in their work.

Interviews revealed both excitement and concern. One researcher noted: "AI helped me surface patterns across 10,000 documents - but I couldn't explain or trust what it had done." Advisory Board members agreed that AI will shape discovery in this ecosystem, but warned that current developments are dominated by commercial and STEM agendas. They stressed the need for humanities- and collections-led frameworks to guide development, ensuring that experimentation aligns with principles of equity, transparency, and epistemic diversity.

Type	Theme	Issue Addressed
Barrier	Theme 5: Tools for Discovery	AI tools often reinforce dominant narratives or marginalise complexity
Challenge	Theme 5: Tools for Discovery	Lack of frameworks for transparent, researcher-driven AI use
Opportunity	Theme 3: Research Value	Aligns AI development with plural epistemologies and interpretive use

How to do it:

Commission a research programme on interpretative AI for collections-based health and wellbeing research.

Fund cross-sector pilots.

Develop an ethical framework and toolkit.

Support skills-building in researchers.

What it builds on:

National Archives: Who have piloted AI-assisted sensitivity in review and transcription, alongside machine learning hackathons.

Timeframe:

Medium-term. 2-4 years

Delivery actors:

Lead by digital humanities centres with GLAM infrastructure providers.

Expected Impact:

Expands the research potential of large and under-explored collections.

Embeds ethical practice into the foundations of AI.

Builds capacity across sectors.

6.0 Making Change Happen

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Delivering on the recommendations in this study depends on the evolving collaboration of actors across the collections, research, and funding ecosystems.

While no single institution can or should lead this work alone, coordinated effort will be essential to ensure alignment, reduce duplication, and sustain momentum.

Survey results reinforced this: 66% of respondents identified lack of coordination as a major barrier, and 41% pointed to over-reliance on a handful of large institutions as a structural risk. One interviewee reflected: “It’s always the same institutions in the room.”

The recommendations point to different roles for research funders, memory institutions, professional bodies, and infrastructure providers, each contributing to a shared ecosystem of discovery. What is needed now is a coordination framework that can support collective ownership, clarify responsibilities, and enable different actors to step forward in ways that reflect their specific capabilities, contexts, and commitments.

This chapter sets out key components of that coordination framework, focusing on how monitoring and evaluation, risk and investment can be used in the ecosystem.

Monitoring, evaluation and learning

Monitoring, evaluation, and learning (MEL) will be essential to understand whether the recommendations set out in this report translate into meaningful impact. While traditional research funding often tracks project outputs, the type of systems and field-building work described here requires more adaptive, long-term, and participatory forms of evaluation.

Survey respondents stressed the importance of recognising “slow” and process-based forms of value: 52% felt their work was undervalued because outcomes were long-term or relational.

There are four primary types of MEL activity that may be relevant:

Ongoing Monitoring: tracking implementation progress, participation, and reach across programmes;

Process Evaluation: understanding how and why specific interventions are or are not working;

Impact Evaluation: assessing longer-term changes in access, collaboration, inclusion, and research quality;

Feedback Loops: enabling rapid learning and course correction across delivery partners.

A key challenge is agreeing what metrics to track - particularly in a diverse, distributed ecosystem with no central delivery body. Evaluation must balance qualitative and quantitative indicators, and recognise contributions from across institutions, communities, and roles.

Equally important is the question of who commissions and owns evaluation. In a field led by distributed actors, a shared evaluation framework - developed with the sector - could support transparency, comparability, and collective learning. This would ensure that evaluation supports accountability without becoming a compliance burden, and remains anchored in the values of the ecosystem it seeks to understand.

Risk and dependencies

Several risks could constrain the impact of this portfolio of recommendations. These include:

- **Fragmented delivery:** pursuing actions in isolation without coordination risks losing cumulative value.
- **Short-termism:** projects detached from broader strategy may fail to generate sustainable outcomes.
- **Equity drift:** survey evidence showed 46% of respondents prioritised equity/inclusion as the greatest unmet need, yet Advisory Board members warned this is often the first principle to be diluted under funding pressure.
- **Over-engineering:** AB discussions cautioned against creating new bureaucracy or centralising too much authority in a few large institutions.
- **Legislative misalignment:** existing frameworks (PRA 1958, FOIA, GDPR) may constrain digital preservation and ethical reuse.
- **Systemic vulnerability:** the 2023 British Library cyberattack was cited in Advisory Board meetings as a stark reminder of the risks of over-concentration in single institutions or platforms.

To mitigate these risks, we recommend:

- **Framing** each intervention within a wider field-development logic;
- **Building** consortia that include both established institutions and emergent voices;
- **Designing** funding calls that balance experimentation with long-term infrastructure;
- **Working** with partners to identify legislative constraints and advocate for modernised frameworks.

Levels of investment

Interventions proposed in this report range from low-cost, high-leverage pilots to long-term structural commitments. To support flexible planning and resource allocation, recommendations can be grouped into three indicative tiers:

Low investment / high leverage: e.g. essay series, short courses, discovery labs (Field-Building Recommendations).

Comparator: British Library Labs demonstrates how small-scale investments in entry points can generate disproportionate reach and visibility.

Medium investment / ecosystem enablers: e.g. cross-institution discovery tools, oral history infrastructure, global fellowships (System Enabler Recommendations).

Comparator: the Endangered Archives Programme shows how distributed grants and modest infrastructure investment can transform access and equity at scale.

High investment / structural commitments: e.g. a long-term Discovery Research Programme or shared research infrastructure (Strategic Recommendations).

Comparator: Towards a National Collection illustrates how large-scale, coordinated investment can reshape infrastructure and practice across a sector.

This tiered model enables different stakeholders to enter at levels suited to their remit, resources, and risk appetite. The recommendations are designed to be modular and concurrent: targeted investments at any level can yield outsized impacts if strategically aligned.

A full programme of work will require at least a 10-year horizon and coordinated action across international partners.

However, progress can begin now through targeted, time-bound investments that test approaches, demonstrate value, and grow the field's capabilities over time.

7.0 Conclusion: A Call to Action

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This study finds that archives, manuscripts and material culture are not only historical sources but foundational infrastructures for discovery research in life, health and wellbeing.

Collections-based research connects researchers, curators, technologists, and communities. It enables long-term inquiry, supports epistemic justice, and drives methodological innovation. Yet to realise its full potential, this distributed and emergent ecosystem requires greater recognition, sustained investment, and inclusive governance.

The study is grounded in a triangulated evidence base-86 survey responses, 32 interviews, Advisory Board deliberations, and a literature review of more than 500 publications. Together these confirm that the ecosystem demonstrates:

- Rich conceptual foundations.
- Proven interdisciplinary impact.
- High levels of interest and ambition across career stages and sectors.

At the same time, persistent structural challenges remain:

- Gaps in funding and infrastructure.
- Inequities in access and recognition.
- Misalignment between research practice and institutional reward systems.

A call to action

There is now a distinctive opportunity to act as a catalyst for discovery in this space:

- Strategic investment in collections-based research would strengthen the foundations of interdisciplinary health research across the humanities and social sciences.
- Action across infrastructure, training, funding, and leadership can unlock long-term cultural, social, and epistemic value.
- Embedding equity and experimentation at the core of investment can advance the vision of a thriving, inclusive global research ecosystem.

The investment tiers outlined above provide flexible entry points- from low-cost catalytic pilots, to medium-scale enablers, to long-term structural commitments. Taken together, they offer a roadmap for funders and institutions to sequence interventions that are impactful, equitable, and sustainable.

A broader sectoral invitation

This report invites action across the ecosystem:

- **For researchers:** to build new collaborations, share practices, and advocate for the value of collections.
- **For archivists and curators:** to champion - and be championed for - the knowledge AMCs contain.
- **For institutions:** to support collections as research infrastructure and recognise collaborative labour.
- **For funders**: to coordinate across research and heritage portfolios, and invest in long-term capacity and experimentation.

By working together across sectors, collections can be sustained not only as resources, but as living systems of knowledge.

Realising this vision requires ambition, alignment, and long-term commitment. However, the conditions for change are already in place.

Annexes and Endnotes

Annex A: Glossary

Adjacency analysis - Identifying overlaps and shared priorities across related research domains.

Analogue formats - Examples of analogue formats include photographic prints, motion picture film, early audio and video tape, phonograph records, and text on paper.

Analogue research - Researchers use fictional case files, videos, or role-playing scenarios to study how people react to specific situations that are hard or impossible to access directly.

Archives - Organised bodies of records created or received by individuals or institutions in the course of their activities, preserved for their enduring evidential, informational, or cultural value.

Assemblage - A theoretical concept referring to a collection of heterogeneous elements that form a dynamic whole.

Back-end infrastructure - The systems and technologies that support digital access and data storage, often invisible to users.

Born-digital - Materials originally created in digital formats rather than digitised from analogue.

Care ethics - An approach to research and curation centred on relational responsibility, sensitivity and trust.

Challenge - A structural, systemic or practice-based issue that hinders discovery or participation.

Collections-based research - Inquiry rooted in the study, interpretation or activation of archival or material collections.

Community archiving - Local or grassroots-led practices of preserving and interpreting cultural materials.

Consent architecture - Structures and protocols that ensure informed, ongoing consent in collection use and research.

Contextual metadata - Information that preserves the original context, meaning and use of materials.

Co-production - Collaborative research or practice involving shared design, authorship, or interpretation with communities or participants.

Critical heritage studies - An interdisciplinary field examining power, identity and value in heritage practices.

Cultural infrastructure - The institutions, systems, and resources that enable production, preservation and interpretation of cultural knowledge.

Data feminism - A critical approach that examines how data practices reflect and reproduce gendered and structural inequalities.

Data justice - A framework for addressing equity, ethics and power in the governance and use of data.

Decolonial practice - Efforts to counter colonial legacies and promote epistemic justice in knowledge systems and collections.

Digital obsolescence - The process by which digital formats, media or platforms become unreadable due to technological change.

Digital preservation - Strategies for ensuring the long-term accessibility, authenticity and usability of digital content.

Digitisation - The conversion of analogue materials into digital formats for access, preservation or analysis.

Discovery infrastructure - Platforms, metadata systems and tools that enable researchers to find and explore collections.

Discovery research - Exploratory, curiosity-led research that generates new questions and foundational insights.

Distributed ecosystem - A non-centralised, networked system of actors, institutions and practices working together.

Epistemic injustice - Harm done when certain groups or ways of knowing are devalued, excluded or misrepresented.

Epistemic repair - Processes that address historical exclusions and injustices in knowledge production.

Ethical stewardship - The responsible and inclusive management of cultural or scientific resources over time.

Field-building - Activities that strengthen identity, capacity and coordination within an emerging research area.

Fragile media - Analogue or digital materials at risk of degradation, loss or obsolescence.

Hybrid collections - Archives that combine analogue and digital formats, often requiring mixed preservation strategies.

Inclusive metadata - Descriptive frameworks that reflect diverse perspectives, identities and terminologies.

Indigenous data sovereignty - The right of Indigenous peoples to control data about their communities, cultures and lands.

Infrastructure dependency - Reliance on specific technologies, platforms or institutions that may limit access or resilience.

Interpretive infrastructure - Tools, platforms and methods designed to support meaning-making and analysis, not just storage or access.

Interoperability - The ability of different systems, platforms or standards to work together effectively.

Knowledge infrastructures - The social, technical and institutional systems that shape how knowledge is created, stored and shared.

Knowledge production - The process by which new understandings, insights, or interpretations are generated.

Lived experience - First-hand personal knowledge or testimony that informs understanding of health and wellbeing.

Manuscripts - Handwritten or unpublished texts, often unique, that provide direct insight into the ideas, processes, and voices of their creators.

Material culture - Physical objects, artefacts, and designed things that embody human activity and belief, used to interpret past and present social, cultural, and scientific practices.

Metadata - Descriptive information that enables the discovery, management and interpretation of collections.

Method pluralism - The intentional use of multiple, diverse research methods within a single project or field.

Multilingual access - The provision of resources and interfaces in multiple languages to support equitable discovery.

Participatory methods - Research practices involving collaboration with communities, often emphasising co-creation and shared authority.

Planetary health - A holistic research agenda linking human wellbeing to environmental and ecological systems.

Plural epistemologies - Recognition of diverse, often marginalised, ways of knowing and understanding the world.

Preservation risk - The threat of loss or deterioration to important materials due to instability, neglect or lack of infrastructure.

Process evaluation - A study of how and why an intervention is delivered and received.

Speculative methods - Creative, future-facing research strategies that reimagine possibilities and challenge existing assumptions.

Stewardship - Ethical and sustained care for collections, knowledge systems, and cultural materials.

Typology - A classification system that groups items based on shared characteristics.

Values pluralism - Acceptance that multiple, sometimes conflicting, forms of value coexist and must be negotiated.

Wellbeing - A holistic concept encompassing physical, mental, social, and environmental dimensions of health.

Annex B:
Blockers, Challenges and Opportunities

How to read this table: Rows are grouped by the **13 themes** from **Chapter 4**. "Barriers" are the structural blockers; "Challenges" are the practical problems to solve; "Opportunities" are tractable interventions the recommendations speak to.

#	Insight (from Ch. 4)	Barriers	Challenges	Opportunities
1	Breadth of Use - What's Being Valued, What's Overlooked	Fragmented discovery; under-described/undigitised regional & community holdings; weak visibility of LMIC materials; precarious curation roles	Make diverse AMC types legible and findable; protect fragile born-digital & analogue holdings; surface everyday/embodied life materials	Invest in inclusive discovery (metadata repair, cross-catalogue search); fund curator/archivist connective work; targeted surfacing of overlooked collections (catalogue/describe/digitise with context)
2	Rethinking Relevance - How the Ecosystem Connects to Health	Narrow biomedical framings; plural definitions of health under-recognised; "translation" burden on researchers	Create flexible relevance criteria; recognise thematic/indirect health links; value interpretive labour	Update relevance guidance for funders/institutions; exemplars/criteria that include social, ecological, spiritual health; support interpretive notes linking collections→health
3	Research Value - What It Looks Like & Why It's Hard to Measure	Conventional metrics miss relational/affective/speculative value; institutional bias toward quantifiable outputs	Evidence plural value without over-bureaucratising; recognise cumulative/process outcomes	Publish a values-plural evaluation framework; case banks of "value stories"; accept process/relational outputs (metadata creation, community trust) as impact
4	Systems That Shape Discovery - Access, Inequality, Infrastructure	Uneven platforms; legacy-media fragility; English-dominant, not mobile-first; analogue underfunded	Bridge analogue↔digital; prioritise preservation at risk; design for LMIC connectivity & multilingual use	Equitable, context-rich discovery infra; mobile-first/multilingual features; preservation funds for legacy media; research-led metadata standards
5	Tools for Discovery - What Works, What's Missing	Tools built for collection mgmt, not open-ended inquiry; low uptake of advanced methods; little co-design	Build tools for ambiguity/serendipity; embed tech capacity in teams; sustain beyond one-offs	Fund co-designed discovery tools (associative search, graph views); shared dev sprints; embedded RSEs/engineers; equitable access to compute/methods
6	Funding the Ecosystem - Gaps, Risks, Possibilities	Short-termism; siloed schemes (heritage vs health); eligibility barriers (LMIC/community); limited PI roles for collections pros	Enable risk/slow inquiry; widen eligibility; align funders	Flexible seed & long-horizon awards; cross-funder calls bridging health/heritage; allow curators PIs/Co-Is; micro-grants for exploration
7	Equity & Inclusion - Who Discovers, What Gets Discovered	Metadata/classification bias; digitisation skews to dominant collections; participation barriers for minoritised/Global South researchers	Shift governance, authorship, language access; support community authority	Resource community-led archives; multilingual/locally governed platforms; equity clauses on authorship/leadership; reparative cataloguing

8	Interdisciplinarity - Breaking Silos, Building Collaboration	Departmental/funding/peer-review silos; creative methods under-recognised; weak scaffolding for co-design	Normalise hybrid methods; sustain cross-disciplinary teams; evaluate fairly	Interdisciplinary labs/residencies; revised peer-review guidance; co-interpretation spaces researcher-curator-community; shared vocabularies
9	Skills & Careers - Building Capacity for a New Kind of Research	Training scarce (only 22% report access); hybrid roles undervalued; limited progression	Provide structured methods training; recognise hybrid careers; enable cross-sector mobility	Core skills curricula (analogue handling, metadata critique, community methods); mentorship networks; joint posts across HE/GLAM/community
10	Experimentation & Risk - Making Space for Innovation	Outcome-driven systems; few safe-to-fail environments; experimental outputs not recognised	Create time/space/legitimacy for experimentation; accept failure/iteration	Fund labs/residencies/incubators; recognise creative/participatory outputs; small rapid-experiment grants; experimentation KPIs (learning, not only outputs)
11	International Perspectives - Beyond the UK, Beyond the Centre	North-led agendas; funding ineligibility; infrastructure/language constraints	Build equitable, durable partnerships; local governance & capacity	Funding lines for Global South/Indigenous leadership; multilingual design; capacity-building & shared stewardship; partnership MOUs on authorship/IP
12	Coordination - Why the Ecosystem Needs Glue	Fragmented networks; low visibility; no shared agenda/advocacy	Convene without centralising; create shared “centre of gravity”	Federated coordination model (standards, registries, best-practice commons); lightweight convening; sector advocacy coalition
13	Signals of Change - Where New Ideas Are Emerging	Momentum remains fragile; risk of premature formalisation; sustainability of pilots	Nurture openings without freezing innovation; scale what works	“Signals” portfolio funding; patient scaling; connect climate/planetary health, born-digital, community repair & creative practice into mainstream programmes

Annex C:
Research Methodology and Instruments

This annex outlines the research design, instruments, sampling strategy, and analysis methods used to generate the findings and recommendations presented in this report. The research was commissioned by Wellcome's Discovery Research team and carried out between February and July 2025 by Human Economics and i2 Media Research Ltd.

The project was structured across three phases, each building iteratively on the last:

- Phase 1b: definition-setting, literature synthesis, and initial taxonomy
- Phase 2: fieldwork through semi-structured interviews and a structured survey
- Phase 3: integration, synthesis, and strategic recommendations (presented in this report)

Together, the approach was designed to surface insights from lived expertise, validate patterns in practice, and generate a grounded, fundable roadmap for field development.

Research Framework

The research design combined discovery-driven enquiry with structured validation, underpinned by four methodological commitments:

- **Discovery-Oriented Design** - privileging open-ended, curiosity-led exploration over hypothesis testing.
- **Plural Epistemologies** - recognising diverse knowledge practices including Indigenous data sovereignty, community archiving, and oral history.
- **Participatory and Inclusive Methods** - sampling and interpretation processes explicitly designed to reflect varied geographies, identities, and institutional contexts.
- **Strategic Alignment** - ensuring that outputs map to Wellcome's Discovery Research strategy and its focus on enabling inclusive, future-facing research in the humanities and social sciences.

Phase 1 - Definitions, Taxonomy and Literature Review

Purpose:

To map the current landscape of AMC-based research and develop a common working language.

Activities:

- Literature review and synthesis across 500+ sources
- Drafting of a four-part taxonomy (purpose, material, institution, method)
- Identification of five distinct modes of research value
- Preliminary identification of thematic gaps and system-level barriers
- These findings were used to shape interview guides, sampling strategy, and the structure of analysis in later phases.

Phase 2 - Primary Fieldwork

Phase 2 comprised 30 total research participants: 26 semi-structured interviews and 4 written responses via structured questionnaire. In parallel, a targeted digital survey captured structured insights from an additional 59 participants.

Interview Sampling Strategy

The sampling approach was adaptive and purposive. Recruitment combined network outreach, snowball sampling, and iterative gap-filling to maximise diversity of role, geography, and lived experience. Advisory Board members contributed suggestions at key intervals.

The final sample included:

- **Professional roles:** 20 researchers, 5 collections professionals, 3 funders, 2 other stakeholders
- **Geographic mix:** 13 UK-based; 11 from other high-income countries; 6 from LMICs
- **Disciplinary spread:** history, anthropology, archaeology, STS, digital humanities, visual culture, and interdisciplinary fields
- **Representation:** Participants were invited to share gender and ethnic background data to support inclusive monitoring

Interview Guide and Topics

All interviews followed a structured topic guide which included:

- **Expertise and Role** - Disciplinary background, role, and AMC experience
- **Use of AMCs** - Methods, material types, technologies, and examples of research
- **EDI and Equity** - Representation, barriers, and community engagement
- **Infrastructure and Environment** - Discovery, metadata, **digitisation, governance**
- **Future Potential** - Transformative opportunities, emerging methods and technologies
- **Strategic Advice** - Priorities for investment, systems, and training
- **Demographic Monitoring** - Optional questions on identity and background

A separate version was used for funders and sector leaders, with emphasis on structural and strategic insight.

Survey Design and Instrument

Purpose: To validate and extend insights from interviews across a broader field of practice.

Participants: 59 respondents from humanities and social sciences disciplines

Instrument Structure:

- **About You and Your Work** - Discipline, institution, research focus
- **AMC Use and Access** - Types of collections, access mode, metadata issues
- **Barriers to Use** - 22-item matrix across physical, digital, institutional and epistemic barriers
- **Tools and Technologies** - 18 potential interventions evaluated for effectiveness
- **Transformative Potential** - 10 research opportunities prioritised by respondents
- **Infrastructure Needs** - 15 future investment areas evaluated by impact
- **EDI Monitoring** - Optional demographic responses

Distribution Channels:

The survey was shared via targeted academic and professional networks to ensure a diverse and interdisciplinary respondent base. These included:

- Marsenne (distributed via Prof. Lauren Kassell, University of Cambridge)
- MEDMED (Medical and Health Humanities Jiscmail list)
- MEDHEALTHHUMS (Medical, Health and Humanities Jiscmail list)
- SCOT-HIST-SCI (Scottish History of Science mailing list)
- Association for Health and Medical Humanities

These distribution points were selected to reach researchers working across history of medicine, STS, medical humanities, and related domains.

Analysis:

Quantitative responses were analysed descriptively using Excel. Free-text responses were coded thematically and integrated with interview insights using AI-assisted synthesis and manual validation.

Phase 3 - Thematic Synthesis and Strategic Framing

Phase 3 integrated findings from both prior phases to generate the field typology, thematic landscape, and 15 final recommendations.

- Interview and survey data were analysed together using AI-assisted thematic coding, supported by manual validation.
- Inductive themes were clustered into 13 cross-cutting categories (see Chapter 4).
- Recommendation development followed structured mapping of barriers, opportunities, and delivery actors.
- A recommendation matrix and roadmap layers were used to support strategic alignment and portfolio design.

AI-Assisted Coding and Validation

Thematic analysis of interview transcripts and open-text survey responses used a hybrid approach:

- AI tools (OpenAI GPT-4, via ChatGPT and internal coding prompts) were used to rapidly identify repeated concepts, relationships, and emergent themes across interview transcripts and long-form responses.
- Outputs were reviewed, refined, and clustered manually by the research team using a shared coding framework.
- Document review and feedback management was carried out using AI-assistance
- AI-generated summaries or suggestions were never accepted without human validation

This approach allowed the team to process qualitative data more quickly and thoroughly, while ensuring interpretive integrity remained with human researchers.

Advisory Board Engagement

The research was supported throughout by a multi-disciplinary Advisory Board, convened by Human Economics with the support of Wellcome. The Board played a critical role in stress-testing the research design, shaping inclusive framing, and reviewing the salience and robustness of the project's outputs.

Three full meetings of the Advisory Board were held:

First Meeting - January 2025

Introduced the project's scope and theory of change. The Board reviewed draft definitions, early research framework proposals, and the intended sampling and EDI strategies. The group contributed initial suggestions for participants, critical issues, and definitional refinements.

Second Meeting - June 2025

Reviewed early fieldwork findings from interviews and the digital survey. This session stress-tested the 13 emerging themes, advised on gaps in perspective and coverage (especially among underrepresented geographies and communities), and offered early feedback on the typology of research value.

Third Meeting - July 2025

Reviewed the draft recommendations, advised on refinement of language and structure, and validated the portfolio framing (field-building, system enabler, strategic). This meeting also shaped the final reporting format, including emphasis on implementation, infrastructure gaps, and long-term alignment with Wellcome's strategic goals.

The Board included researchers, funders and collections professionals, from the UK and internationally. It was governed by a Terms of Reference document, which specified responsibilities including strategic guidance, EDI oversight, connection to global networks, and feedback on ethics, risk and long-term impact.

In addition to the three formal meetings, Board members were consulted individually on specific aspects of the study. Several also contributed informal feedback on outputs including the Phase 1 taxonomy, survey instrument, and framing of discovery research value.

Annex D: Extended Literature Review

Purpose and scope

This annex synthesises findings from the Phase 1 literature review to show how archives, manuscripts and material culture (AMCs) are currently used in research on life, health and wellbeing across the humanities and social sciences. The review aimed to surface patterns, identify gaps, and provide a reproducible baseline for subsequent fieldwork and analysis. It focused on work that engages AMC resources, is relevant to health and/or wellbeing, and is fundamental or exploratory rather than applied or commercial.

Methodological approach

Data source. OpenAlex was selected after comparing multiple publication databases; it offered broad coverage (including some grey literature and Global South outputs) and transparent annotation policies.

Pipeline. A hybrid method combined (1) Boolean search, (2) metadata filtering, and (3) AI-assisted screening. Queries were implemented via the PyAlex API; filtering applied time and language limits and an interdisciplinarity flag; classification used a locally run large language model (Google Gemma 3) to tag items IN / OUT / UNCLEAR against the project's inclusion criteria. The implementation was Python-based and modular for reproducibility.

Key filters and criteria.

Time window: 1 Jan 2022 - 24 Apr 2025.

Language: English.

Disciplines: humanities and social sciences (mapped using HECoS → CAH to set boundaries), while allowing interdisciplinary bridges.

Interdisciplinarity: only works tagged "cross-domain" by OpenAlex were retained.

Inclusion test (for “IN”). A paper had to (i) use archival/manuscript/material-culture sources; (ii) be fundamental/exploratory, not applied/commercial; and (iii) relate to health and/or wellbeing. The model was prompted with operational definitions to apply these rules consistently.

Resulting dataset. 524 publications met all criteria and form the basis of the quantitative snapshots below.

What’s in the literature: disciplinary footprint

OpenAlex topic hierarchies provide a high-level view of disciplinary spread in the 524-item corpus.

- Primary Topic - Domain (highest level)
- Social Sciences: 232
- Physical Sciences: 213
- Health Sciences: 54
- Life Sciences: 25.
- Primary Topic - Field (selected counts)
- Arts & Humanities: 137
- Computer Science: 105
- Social Sciences: 64
- Earth & Planetary Sciences: 57
- Medicine: 33
- Environmental Science: 26
- Psychology: 24
- Health Professions: 21
- (...plus smaller fields down to single-digit counts).
- Primary Topic - Subfield (≥5 mentions)
- Archaeology: 58
- Conservation: 51
- Information Systems: 45
- Human-Computer Interaction: 24
- Museology: 19
- General Health Professions: 15
- Library & Information Sciences: 14
- Artificial Intelligence: 13, etc.

Primary Topic - Topic (≥3 mentions)

Leading topics include Conservation Techniques & Studies (36), Cultural Heritage Management & Preservation (32), Archaeological Research & Protection (31), and Building Materials & Conservation (24). Health-proximate topics present but smaller include Art Therapy & Mental Health (3), Dementia and Cognitive Impairment Research (3), Anatomy and Medical Technology (3).

SDG tags (OpenAlex)

Most-frequent SDGs in this corpus are Sustainable Cities & Communities (184), Quality Education (60), and Industry, Innovation & Infrastructure (25); Good Health & Well-Being appears on 9 items. These tags reflect platform classification and are indicative rather than definitive of policy alignment.

Interpretation. The footprint confirms strong representation in heritage-adjacent domains (archaeology, conservation, museology) alongside growing intersections with information systems, HCI and AI-signalling opportunities to link collections to digital and methodological innovation in health-relevant inquiry.

Definitions, boundaries, and the records continuum

Phase 1 clarified working definitions to keep scope transparent:

Manuscripts: “a *handwritten document… an unpublished document… an author’s draft…”* (Pearce-Moses).

Material culture: *physical objects produced by societies, from buildings and tools to art* (Concise Oxford Dictionary of Archaeology).

The study also surfaces contested/expanding boundaries-e.g., unsystematised zines, oral traditions, search histories, affective or non-permanent materials-recognising that many important records begin outside formal structures.

A records continuum lens (Upward, 1996) underpins the analysis, treating records as dynamic and socially situated across time, context and community; this orientation supports more participatory and justice-oriented engagements and directly shaped the typology used in Phase 1b.

Typology used to read the landscape

The Phase 1 working typology is circular and modular, grouping records by provenance/purpose into four overlapping domains: Personal, Community, Institutional, Societal. Materials may traverse domains as their use and stewardship change (e.g., from personal mourning to public exhibition). This typology was designed as a flexible schema to support Phase 2 engagement and analysis, not a fixed classification.

- **Personal:** illness diaries, letters, creative writing, therapeutic drawings, keepsakes.
- **Community:** oral histories, zines, web memorials, protest ephemera, community-created archives.
- **Institutional:** patient records, case notes, policy papers, lab notebooks, medical photography, instruments, specimens.
- **Societal:** curated collections for public memory-exhibitions, published histories, memorials.

Opportunities and challenges in the corpus

Opportunities (micro → macro) include: multimodal methods; integrating creative practice; strengthening cross-sector collaboration; hybrid researcher profiles spanning humanities/health/digital; interoperable platforms; expanding understandings of health and wellbeing; and deeper public and policy engagement with health histories.

Challenges mirror these layers: limited awareness of non-traditional resources; siloed mindsets; patchy metadata; fragmentation and paywalls; lack of digitisation; linguistic barriers; difficulty integrating historiographical context into automation; limited funding; and risks of tokenism or extractive research.

What the numbers suggest

The corpus is interdisciplinary by construction (OpenAlex “cross-domain” filter), with heritage-centric fields dominant and computing/IS fields prominent-useful for building bridges to discovery tooling.

Health-specific subfields are present but underweighted relative to heritage/digital infrastructure topics, underscoring the importance of frameworks that make health relevance legible across cultural/archival studies.

The SDG distribution signals scope to position collections research within broader societal agendas-especially urban/community, education and infrastructure-while intentionally strengthening its articulation to health/wellbeing.

Limits and considerations

- **Coverage bias.** English-only and OpenAlex classification choices shape what appears; SDG/topic tags are indicative.
- **Method limits.** AI-assisted screening used title/abstracts and conservative prompts; ambiguous cases were retained as UNCLEAR.
- **Non-exhaustive.** The review is a scalable baseline, not a comprehensive census; it prioritises transparency and reproducibility for Phase 2 sampling.

Implications for the main report

Findings here directly underpin the report’s emphasis on a distributed and evolving ecosystem, the need to broaden relevance frameworks, and the case for discovery-aligned infrastructure, training, and coordination. The typology and continuum framing justify treating AMCs as living systems of knowledge rather than static heritage-an orientation reflected throughout Chapters 3-6.

Annex E: Who Made This?

The Team

This project was led by Human Economics and i2 Media Research Ltd on behalf of Wellcome's Discovery Research team. It reflects the collective contributions of researchers, funders, collections professionals, and advisors committed to strengthening the future of archives, manuscripts, and material culture in research relevant to life, health and wellbeing.

Research Team

Name	Role	Organisation
Chris Michaels	Project Manager and Lead Author	Human Economics
Tom Callahan	Project Director	Human Economics
June Taboroff	Researcher	Human Economics
Professor Jonathan Freeman	Managing Director and Research Director	i2 Media Research Ltd
Noemi Ponzoni	Research Lead	i2 Media Research Ltd
Arina Mnatsakanyan	Researcher	i2 Media Research Ltd
Dani Metilli	Research Expert Advisor	i2 Media Research Ltd

Richard Bellis	Research Expert Advisor	i2 Media Research Ltd
Tiara Roxanne	Research Expert Advisor	i2 Media Research Ltd

Advisory Board Members

The Advisory Board met in January, June, and July 2025 to guide the research design, identify critical gaps, and strengthen the strategic alignment of recommendations.

Name	Affiliation
Prof Bertrand Taithe	University of Manchester
Prof Patricia Kingori	University of Oxford
Prof Robbie Duschinsky	University of Cambridge
Prof Lauren Kassell	European University Institute
Dr Rohan Deb Roy	University of Reading
Prof Carl Heron	British Museum
Susan Thomas	Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford
Arike Oke	British Film Institute
Dr. Nikiwe Momot	University of the Western Cape
Tao-Tao Chang	Arts and Humanities Research Council
Christine Wilson	British Council
Patrick ffrench	King’s College London
Prof James Stark	Universty of Leeds
Dr. Alexandra Everleigh	Wellcome Collection

Interview Participants

The following individuals participated in Phase 2 of the study through semi-structured interviews or written responses. Some later participated in consultation on the recommendations and other aspects of this final report. We are deeply grateful for their time, insight and generosity in contributing to this work.

Name	Role Type	Institution	Country
Jack Butterworth	Funder	TNA	UK
Arthur Dudney	Funder	Arcadia Fund	UK
Beatriz Pichel	Researcher	De Montfort University	UK
Jesse Olszynko-Gryn	Researcher	Max Plank Institute for the History of Science	Germany
Sarah Hodges	Researcher	King's College London	UK
Benson Mulemi	Researcher	University of Pretoria	South Africa
Martin Gorsky	Researcher	London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine	UK
Natalie Baur	Specialist	Itinerant Archivists	Mexico
Eva Åhrén	Specialist	Karolinska Institutet	Sweden

Claire Knowles	Specialist	University of Leeds	UK
Mike Clarke	Specialist	James Lind Library	UK
Lily Díaz-Kommonen	Researcher	Aalto University	Finland
Claudia von Vacano	Researcher	Berkeley	USA
Matthew Collins	Researcher (Material Culture Management)	The British Academy	UK
Matthew Eddy	Researcher	Durham	UK
Kathleen Walker-Meikle	Researcher	Science Museum	UK
Michael Sappol	Researcher	Uppsala	Sweden
Sherry Wong	Artist & Researcher	N/A - independent	USA
Padmini Ray Murray	Artist & Researcher	Design Beku	India
Monika Halkort	Researcher	Queens University	UK

Tao Tao Chang	Funder	AHRC	UK
Scott Harris (Podolsky)	Researcher	Harvard University	USA
Nandi Siegfried	Researcher	South African Medical Research Council	South Africa
Sruthi Madhu	Researcher	National Institute of Technology, Andhra Pradesh	India
Chisomo Kalinga	Researcher	University of Edinburgh	UK
Carolin Pommert	Specialist	Charité - Universitätsmedizin Berlin	Germany
Giorgia Tolfo	Specialist	TNA	UK
Sanjeev Jain	Researcher	National Institute of Mental Health and Neurosciences, Bengaluru	India
Musa Sadock	Researcher	University of Dar es Salaam (UDSM)	Tanzania
Brigitte Sion	Funder	Rothschild Foundation Hanadiv Europe	Switzerland
Jane Winters	Researcher	University of London	UK
Ben Hill	Specialist	Kew Gardens	UK

Fiona Ainsworth	Specialist	Kew Gardens	UK

Annex F: Licensing and Data Reuse Commitments

This annex sets out how the research team has ensured that outputs from the Wellcome Archives, Manuscript and Material Culture in Life, Health and Wellbeing Research Landscape Study align with best practice in ethical publication, and reuse.

Licensing

This report and all its annexes are published under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International (CC BY 4.0) licence.

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Data Reuse and Research Ethics

All interview and survey participants were informed of the purpose of the research and the ways their data would be used.

Consent for attribution was explicitly requested and tracked-all named individuals have agreed to be identified in this report.

Responses and transcripts will not be shared publicly, but aggregated insights and quotations may be reused under the terms above, in line with ethical guidelines.

Any AI-assisted analysis was carried out under human supervision, with no personally identifiable information processed by AI tools.

A copy of the interview guide and survey instrument is available for reuse and adaptation by other research teams.

Endnotes

[1] See: Wellcome Trust, Discovery Research Strategy https://wellcome.org/what-we-do/our-work/discovery-research
[2] See: "Request for Proposal (RFP): Archive, manuscript and material culture resources for life, health and wellbeing research"
[3] See: https://dissco-uk.org/about/
[4] See, for example: Porter, The Greatest Benefit to Mankind, 1997
[5] See, for example: Anderson, Colonial Pathologies, 2006
[6] See, for example: Roberts & Cox, Health and Disease in Britain, 2003
[7] See, for example: See: Larsen, Bioarchaeology: Interpreting Behavior from the Human Skeleton, 1997
[8] See: Bowker, Memory Practices in the Sciences, 2005
[9] See: https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1046/j.1471-1842.2001.00334.x - a special issue of Wiley's Health Information and Libraries Journal on early outputs of this programme
[10] See, for example: Caswell, Archiving the Unspeakable, 2014; Bastian & Yakel, Community Archives, 2013
[11] See, for example: See: Mol, The Body Multiple, 2002; TallBear, Native American DNA, 2013
[12] See, for example: Joyce, Ancient Bodies, Ancient Lives, 2008; Hicks, Archaeology and the Colonial Present, 2007
[13] See, for example: Kenderdine & Cameron, Theorizing Digital Cultural Heritage, 2007
[14] See, for example: Schreibman, Siemens & Unsworth, A Companion to Digital Humanities, 2004, which frames Digital Humanities as infrastructure for interdisciplinary research
[15] See: Whitehead & Woods, The Edinburgh Companion to the Critical Medical Humanities, 2016, which expands definitions of health evidence in the humanities
[16] See: Pathologies of Solitude project, Queen Mary University of London. https://solitudes.qmul.ac.uk/
[17] See: Cultural History of the NHS project. https://warwick.ac.uk/fac/arts/history/chm/research/current/nhshistory/
[18] See: Rosenberg, Explaining Epidemics, 1992. A history of medicine using archival sources to contextualise public health
[19] See, for example: Lock & Nguyen, An Anthropology of Biomedicine, 2010
[20] See, for example: Worster, The Ends of the Earth: Perspectives on Modern Environmental History, 1988
[21] See: Hidden in Plain Sight, https://wellcome.org/research-funding/funding-portfolio/funded-grants/hidden-plain-sight-incarcerations-racialized
[22] See: MIT, Global Health and Medical Humanities initiative, https://ghmhi.mit.edu/
[23] See: http://www.toxiclegacies.com/
[24] See: dloc.com
[25] See: Manderson et al., Global Health Histories, 2010
[26] For different key texts in this field see: D'Ignazio and Klein, Data Feminism (MIT Press, 2020); Couldry and Mejias, The Costs of Connection: How Data Is Colonizing Human Life and Appropriating It for Capitalism (Stanford University Press, 2019); and Caswell, Urgent Archives: Enacting Liberatory Memory Work (Routledge, 2021).
[27] For key texts in this field see: Myers and Frumkin, Planetary Health: Protecting Nature to Protect Ourselves (Island Press, 2020); Lancet Planetary Health, launched 2017; and Lang and Heasman, Food Wars: The Global Battle for Mouths,

Minds and Markets (3rd ed., Routledge, 2015), which situates human and environmental wellbeing in entangled ecological and social systems.
[28] See: Duff & Johnson, Accidentally Found on Purpose, 2003
[29] For context see: Viney, Callard & Woods, Critical Medical Humanities, 2015
[30] See for example: Oliver, The Politics of Disablement, 1990 which demonstrated barriers to recognising lived experience in research frameworks
[31] See: https://solitudes.qmul.ac.uk/
[32] See: Wellcome Collection, Mindscape Essays https://wellcomecollection.org/pages/WuwUPRAAACEAfy8k
[33] See: Star & Bowker, Sorting Things Out, 1999
[34] See, for example: McCarty, Humanities Computing, 2005 - on the limitations of catalogue systems for exploratory work
[35] See: Drucker, "Humanities Approaches to Graphical Display," 2011 - a critique of algorithmic/visualisation tools for interpretive inquiry
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[41] See: See Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC), Postgraduate Research and Skills Review (2021); and Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals (CILIP), Professional Knowledge and Skills Base (2021).
[42] See: https://libraries.aub.edu.lb/digital-collections/collection
[43] See: https://wellcomecollection.org/get-involved/the-hub
[44] See: Wellcome Collection, The Hub at Wellcome Collection (2024), https://wellcomecollection.org/pages/WvI8GxAAAPuN9F2w; and Wellcome, The Hub: Evaluation Report (2019)
[45] See: Mbembe, The Power of the Archive, 2002 -inequities of postcolonial archival authority
[46] See: UCLA Library, "Modern Endangered Archives Program (MEAP)" https://meap.library.ucla.edu/about/; UCLA Library MEAP: "About the Program" page.
[47] See: https://www.dariah.eu/
[48] See: https://www.hathitrust.org/
[49] See: See Distributed System of Scientific Collections (DiSSCo), "About DiSSCo," https://www.dissco.eu/; European Strategy Forum on Research Infrastructures (ESFRI), "ESFRI Roadmap 2021: DiSSCo."
[50] See: See: Whitehead & Woods, The Edinburgh Companion to the Critical Medical Humanities, 2016 -on critical/creative humanities in health contexts
[51] See: http://www.toxiclegacies.com/

Wellcome supports science to solve the urgent health challenges facing everyone. We support discovery research into life, health and wellbeing, and we're taking on three worldwide health challenges: mental health, infectious disease, and climate and health.