Introduction

Following a major redevelopment, Birmingham Museums Trust (BMT) is in the process of reopening its flagship museum site — a symbolic and strategic opportunity to reflect on its institutional values and responsibilities. At the same time, BMT is navigating an increasingly challenging external environment, including ongoing financial pressures and broader sectoral inequalities.

In this context, BMT has identified a clear appetite for embedding social justice within its operations and reaffirming its role in service to the local community. Central to this is addressing class inequality. BMT has thus been working with Dr. Sam Evans of Royal Holloway University and Museum as Muck (Fran Riando and Michelle McGrath) on a pioneering pilot project to address issues of class inequality within its organisation. This is funded by Royal Holloway's Social Science Impact Accelerator Fund.

The project

The project supports Birmingham Museums Trust in addressing class inequality with the following aims:

a) To improve awareness and understanding of class inequality across the organisation, including with senior leadership and HR
b) To address class inequality by facilitating detailed action planning
c) To facilitate genuine commitment to tackling these inequalities

It has achieved these aims through a programme of accessible, evidence-based training (two online workshops); the recruitment, empowerment and support of volunteers (Mucker Reps), the delivery of an internal consultation process, and the facilitation of an action planning with the People Circle and Mucker Reps.

This action plan is the outcome of this programme. It draws upon the conceptual frameworks and research of Dr. Sam Evans, as well as the internal consultation at BMT, and outlines tangible steps that BMT can take to understand, address, and challenge class inequality within its workforce and organisational culture.

Understanding class inequality; conceptual framework

Class can be a confusing and contested concept. Museum as Muck and Dr Evans recommend using Bourdieu's concept of capital as a way to understand it (see training). Sam's research shows the importance of focusing on class inequality (rather than solely categories of class). She describes class inequality as unequal relations - and amounts of capital - between three dimensions a) between individuals b) between positions and c) between institution and individual worker. She produced an infographic and slides to illustrate this. This framework formed the basis of the internal consultation and subsequent action planning.

Internal Consultation Process

Between February and March 2025, the project team gathered suggestions and insights relating to both the problem and solutions to class inequality at BMT. These were collected through two online workshops (led by Fran and Michelle from Museum as Muck, along with Sam Evans) and through consultations conducted by Mucker Reps, who engaged their teams across various departments and sites. Over 61 pieces of qualitative data (insights and suggestions) were collected. The suggestions were organised by both Mucker Reps and the Museum as Muck team to form the basis of the action planning session.

Action Planning Session

In April 2025, a focused 2.5-hour action planning session brought together representatives from the People Circle, the Mucker Reps, Sam Evans, and Museum as Muck. The group reviewed the suggestions and identified some priorities to develop this action plan. Activities were considered in terms of impact, feasibility, and available resources, resulting in a mix of short- and long-term actions designed to create meaningful and measurable change.

Development of the Plan

After the action planning session, Fran, Michelle and Sam pulled together all the suggested ideas and grouped them into this action plan. The six original priorities have been reshaped to align with the three types of class inequality (between individuals, positions, institution/worker), and we've tweaked them to make sure each one can focus on clear, measurable goals. This gave us eight main objectives to work towards. The plan offers a clear but flexible structure, grounded in research and conversations at BMT. It's laid out in order of priority—green for short-term actions, orange for medium-term, and red for longer-term or future goals.

Overarching Objectives

Reduce class inequality between individuals

This describes an inequality between individuals, as some have more inherited capital than others. This means getting in and getting on is not a level playing field. Inequality is shaped by both supply (as those with more capital get ahead) and demand (as museum processes and assumptions can inhibit working class people from getting in/on). The problem is sector-wide but there are areas which BMT can address as follows:

1. **Address barriers to career and skills development for existing staff (demand)**
2. **Review hiring and recruitment processes (demand)**
3. **Increase accessibility and awareness of museum roles and careers beyond the museum (supply)**
4. **Address financial challenges (supply)**

Reduce class inequality between positions

This recognises that there are hierarchies of position and knowledge within museums, and that those in certain positions acquire more capital - power, status and money. People in certain roles are often looked down upon, have different terms and conditions and their knowledge and skills are not valued. Not everyone can or wants to be socially mobile so addressing inequality between positions is important. Likewise, there is a hierarchy of careers in that some are 'idealised'. Objectives to address this include:

5. **Foster an inclusive culture through meaningful recognition of everyone's contribution**
6. **Address unnecessary inequalities in terms and conditions**
7. **Greater representation of all teams in decision-making**

Reduce class inequality between institution and museum worker

This focuses on an inequality between a museum as employer and museum workers. Many museums are increasingly asking for more from their staff and giving less in return. Workers are increasingly expected to support their own development and issues such as short-term contracts, unpaid internships and low pay characterize working in the sector. The 'symbolic' capital (or status) held by many museums means they can legitimize this. BMT will therefore also consider the following objective.

8. **Reduce employment inequalities**

BMTs Priorities and Action Plan

The following describe the key activities for BMT to achieve these objectives, as suggested by employees at BMT and reviewed at the Action Planning Meeting. Each activity has been organised using a traffic light system. Green activities are those that have been identified as a priority. Each activity will need clarity on

- who will be involved (an owner, who is the audience and stakeholders);
- how it will happen (resource considerations and potential challenges)
- when (a deadline and how long will it take).
- with what effect (how will be it be evaluated)

Reduce class inequality between individuals

1. Address barriers to career and skills development for existing staff.

Shorter to medium term actions (6 months)

Activity A: 'Switch it Up Programme' Phase One

Implement a structured internal job shadowing program where employees can observe colleagues in different departments for a set period. This could be a one-day session, a week-long placement, or an ongoing mentorship.

Additional Considerations: Ensure accessibility by offering a range of flexible options (short-term shadowing vs. longer-term placements).

Challenges:
A lot of people choosing curatorial and collections
Budget, especially for front of house teams (need cover)
Put a proposal forward to people's circle - once the accept it
The line managers won't feel the pressure / but will if something that is mandatory

Medium to longer term actions (1 year)

Activity B: Switch it Up Phase Two

Develop a series of more formalised job shadowing and placement schemes where employees can apply for short-term secondments in other roles, particularly in areas where skill gaps exist. This could be linked to personal development plans.

Additional Considerations: Provide clear guidelines on how to apply, selection criteria, and expected outcomes to ensure fairness and effectiveness.

Activity C: Development of the "Career Ladder" scheme.

Provide career pathways that outline potential development routes within the organisation (not necessarily linear, but which enable employees to learn new skills and work on new projects). Support with mentorship and coaching schemes pairing junior employees with more experienced staff.

Additional Considerations: Encourage a culture of learning by integrating mentorship into performance reviews and personal development plans.

Activity D: Training Plan based on **Skills Audit** and Training Needs analysis

Conduct a skills audit of skills held at museum (which will also enable sharing of practical experience in other areas of the business) and also a TNA based on staff surveys to identify areas where employees feel a need for greater development. Use feedback to develop a training plan and shape training and placement programs.

Designate a portion of the annual budget specifically for **staff training, courses, and secondments**. This could be managed through an application-based system where employees can request funding for relevant training based on the training plan.

Activity E: Career conversations

Line managers should hold structured career development conversations during performance reviews, allowing staff to discuss their aspirations and identify training needs. Progression encouraged for those who wish to and support for those who are happy are where they are.

Additional Considerations: Create an anonymous feedback system where employees can express concerns or ideas about career development.
Offer training on inclusive leadership and unconscious bias to ensure managers support diverse career development opportunities equitably.

2. Review hiring and recruitment processes

Conduct a review of hiring and promotion policies to ensure they are inclusive and transparent.

Medium to longer term actions (1 year)

Activity A: Fairer Jobs

Review job descriptions for unnecessary/inflated qualifications, experience and competencies, and consider alternative ways of assessing potential (e.g., skills-based hiring). Review our recruitment and selection criteria and processes (i.e. length of application form) and develop and train staff on how to do this. Also look at Fair Museums Jobs guidance to support

Additional Considerations: Offer targeted support for underrepresented groups, such as workshops on interview skills, CV writing, or networking. Also review where roles are advertised to ensure they are reaching underrepresented communities, including looking at the Job Centre.

3. Increase accessibility and awareness of museum roles and careers beyond the museum

Short to Medium Term (6 months)

Activity A: Career stories (or Museum People)

Promote the career stories of people in the museum who have not followed traditional routes to curatorship or senior management. Promote them to schools and people from different communities who might not think working in a museum is for them.

4. Address financial challenges

Longer term 1 to 2 years

This was felt to be too challenging to address in the immediate context but to be discussed.

Reduce class inequality between positions

5. Foster an inclusive culture through meaningful recognition of everyone's contribution

Short to medium term

Activity A: The Museum of Us (not them)

Give people from different teams an opportunity to talk about their work at staff meetings and elsewhere. Find ways to recognise value of all teams such as FOH and Finance etc to the work of the museum

Medium to longer term actions (1 year)

Activity B: Mix it up

Make sure that people from different teams and backgrounds have an opportunity to meet each other, and collaborate. ·

Activity C: Museum Immersion Days

Rotate employees through different roles or projects to build cross-departmental understanding. This could be structured as "museum immersion days" where staff from different teams work together.

6. Reduce unnecessary inequalities in terms and conditions between roles

Medium to longer term actions (1 year)

Activity A: Access for all

Ensure that all staff meetings are accessible to people, that flexible working and development opportunities are available to all staff, regardless of contract type and position (e.g., part-time, full-time, temporary) and location. This means finding ways to support the backfill of people.

Activity B: Meaningful rewards

Consult staff about how to provide meaningful rewards for staff and volunteer and how to acknowledge the importance of roles.

7. Greater representation of all teams in decision-making

Activity A: Museum Democracy

Ensure there is representative decision making. Review and develop the circles and decision-making groups such as trustees to ensure that all teams are represented and mixed up.

Reduce class inequality between institution and museum worker

8. Addressing employment inequalities

Medium to longer term actions (1 year)

Activity A: Secure Futures

Look at reducing use of short-term contracts to address stability and security