MUSEUM AS MUCK

TACKLING CLASS- INEQUALITY AT BIRMINGHAM MUSEUMS TRUST

Museum as Muck working with Dr Samantha Evans, Royal Holloway, University of London, and Birmingham Museums Trust.



Birmingham Museums

ROYAL HOLLOWAY UNIVERSITY OF LONDON

WHAT IS THE PROBLEM?

UK museums are not class-inclusive places to work [1]. Barriers include costly qualifications, reliance on low or no pay, assumptions around ability (e.g. based on accent or position), rigid hierarchies and precarious working arrangements (among others). Tackling these is not easy, made more challenging by the fact that class inequality is difficult to see.

DOES CLASS INEQUALITY MATTER?

If museums are committed to changing lives and telling the stories of all of us, then ensuring museums are 'class-inclusive' places to work is important. It can also help museums diversify a 'stubbornly' middle-class visitor profile (Taking Part 2019).

[1] 5.2% of UK museum staff come from a working-class background (McAndrews, 2024); while 20% of museum employee respondents went to private school compared to 7% of the UK population (BOP, 2016). Dr Evans's research illustrates how UK museum work is unequal, as it favours individuals, positions and museums with certain types of capital, and has increasingly put the responsibility for acquiring valued capital onto the individual rather than the employer. See infographic and reference list.

HOW DID WE TACKLE THIS? SETTING UP THE PROJECT

In 2024, Museum as Muck (MaM) joined forces with Dr Samantha Evans from Royal Holloway, University of London, who has researched these issues. This combined MaM Team secured funding from Royal Holloway [2] to work with Birmingham Museum Trust.

Birmingham Museums Trust (BMT) has a genuine commitment to tackling all forms of social injustice and inequality across its communities. As it recently embarked on a new forward plan, leaders and managers [3] at BMT were keen to foster greater understanding of class inequality as an overlooked aspect of EDI work.

[2] Funding received from Social Science Impact Accelerator Fund at Royal Holloway, University of London

[3] Birmingham Museum has democratised its management by bringing together key stakeholders into consultative 'circles'. Those with an interest in workforce are part of the People Circle which is who MaM worked with in this project.

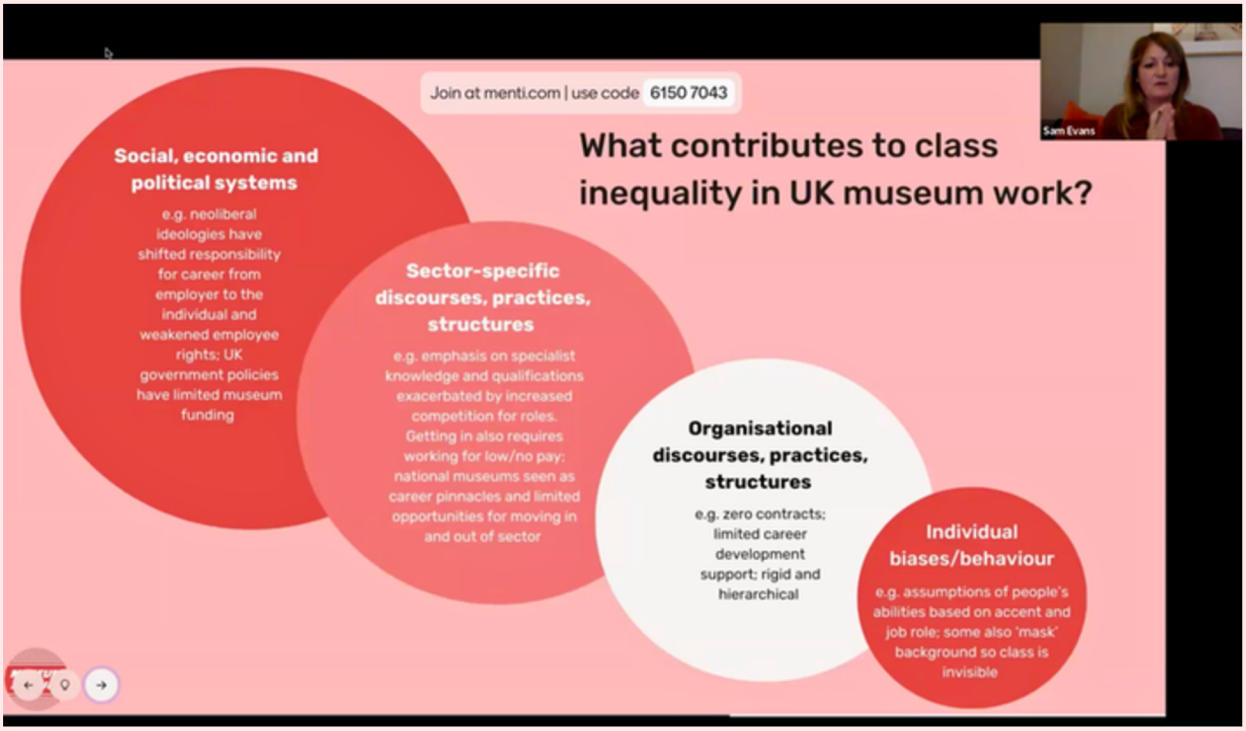
DELIVERING THE PROJECT: PHASE ONE

The initial 8-month project comprised three key elements:

1

The first was to improve understanding of class inequality. This was achieved by MaM running online training sessions and incorporating Dr Evans's research.

Dr Evans's research shows the importance of understanding how museums themselves contribute to class inequality. It provides clarity on ways to talk about and tackle the problem, viewing it as not only inequality between individuals, but also between positions and institutions and workers



2

The second was to foster a commitment to tackling class inequality. This was achieved by recruiting Mucker network staff who were keen to support this work. Mucker Reps were supported by MaM and granted time off from their daily duties to consult with colleagues on ways BMT could better understand and tackle class inequality. They did this with the help of a 'consultation checklist' we devised, and by consulting colleagues via team meetings, emails, confidential conversations, and suggestion boxes.

MUCKER REPRESENTATIVES: CONSULTING BMT STAFF ON WAYS TO ADDRESS CLASS INEQUALITY

Defining class and class inequality

In the training we identified two ways to define class; one by parental occupation and one by capital. In this project the focus is more on class inequality, which we have defined as unequal relations a) between individuals b) between positions and c) between institution and worker. See infographic for an explanation with examples. The training slides also include more examples.

Gaining insights from colleagues

The task is to consult colleagues to identify areas where BMT can address class inequality. One way to consult is to break this down into two stages. First, ask colleagues to reflect on the problem. Second identify practicable solutions. You may want to share this out by each consulting with particular teams and/or phase this over the time we have. This involves some thinking through in terms of how to engage with staff as it is more of an ongoing conversation. You don't have to ask all of the questions, and you can add any you think are missing.

a) Reflecting on the problem



How can BMT reduce inequality between individuals

- Are our recruitment processes fair? Do we ask for knowledge, skills and competencies which are unnecessary to the role? Do we consider the economic barriers facing working class people (such as travelling to interview, gaining volunteering experience?)
- How far does BMT reach out to working class communities to promote participation/employment opportunities?
- Do we know how difficult the experience has been for some staff? What support can we give to staff who have limited advice and support from their family?
- Do we know what employees want from their role and career? How do we support people to develop and grow?
- How do we reward people, and what for?
- What assumptions do we make around accent, dress, school attended and how can we challenge these?
- Are there other barriers we put in place to limit working-class people's access to museum work?

How can BMT reduce inequality between positions?

- Does your team feel included in organisation-wide decision-making? (e.g. having access to communication channels)
- Are terms and conditions fairly distributed across roles? (e.g. Can all staff take time out for development)
- Do you feel the skills and knowledge of all roles are valued by other teams?
- Is the contribution of some roles given more visibility/prestige than others? Is that reasonable?

How can BMT reduce inequality between individual and institution?

- How can BMT invest in its staff to develop and grow? Can we support existing staff to acquire the skills and knowledge required (rather than relying on staff paying for it themselves)?
- How secure do staff feel in their work? Do we over-use short term contracts? Can this be improved?
- Do we use volunteering to fill roles that should be paid for? Do volunteers have clear benefits?

Any other question/s you feel are relevant

b) Identifying solutions

When reflecting on the above, can colleagues think of ways to improve processes and/or identify solutions?

Follow up questions can include

- Is this a short term (easy win) or long-term action?
- Who would need to be involved to make this action happen?
- What resources would be needed?
- What might be the challenges of taking this action?

Support and next steps

You can contact museumasmuck@gmail.com and samantha.evans@rhul.ac.uk

Sam can offer meeting times on March 14th at 11am and March 27th at 11am. This would be via teams. Please can you decide which is preferable or if both are required.

If you can submit your ideas by March 30th. We will be discussing the action planning session on March 31st and the session is at 2pm to 4.30 on April 2nd.

We will consult with you post-action planning to decide how to best work together to implement the actions.

3

The third was to develop a practical set of tailored actions which BMT can implement and provide hands-on support. This was achieved through an action-planning session attended by leaders, managers, Mucker Reps, and the MaM Team.

The action plan provided a template for BMT to develop actions to address class inequality between individuals, positions, and employers/employees. Actions were traffic-lit (green, amber, red), depending on impact, feasibility and resources. Out of 14 activities, three were prioritised:



Switch it Up: a scheme which enables staff (particularly front of house) to gain experience in different parts of the museum.



Career Stories: The 'curation' of diverse career stories of BMT staff to champion alternative routes and different types of museum roles to all parts of the community.

Career/life conversations: Providing support for staff at BMT to discuss their career/life aspirations, challenging the one-size-fits-all ideal career, recognising that people don't necessarily want upward mobility. Just good, meaningful work.



Photos by Fran Riando and Sam Evans

IMPACT AND OUTCOMES

Awareness:

For those at BMT closely involved with the project, it was successful in achieving its aims. Evaluation [4] of the training showed that it improved attendees' understanding of class inequality in the sector, gave them the confidence and language to talk about it, and enhanced their knowledge of how to tackle it in their museum. Participants said the training helped them

> ***[See] just how much I am 'masking' in my current role***
>
> ***Think about my colleagues' experiences of their museum career path more and realise the similarities and differences***
>
> ***[Recognise] how imbalanced the diversity of the museum sector is in terms of class***

The internal consultation process at BMT helped increase awareness beyond the training. Over 60 pieces of feedback from staff were collected using the consultation checklist. The feedback showed appreciation for how class inequality is embedded in structures and processes and helped challenge assumptions (e.g., that everyone wants to be socially mobile). It also provided some great ideas and insights for tackling these issues tailored to the unique context of BMT.

[4] The training was evaluated at the end of the session (January and February) and by an end of project evaluation questionnaire (June).

Commitment:

The project inspired seven Mucker Reps to help tackle class inequality. Their commitment and work were impressive. They showed real passion, creativity and enthusiasm for tackling the issues. Their efforts generated a real energy around the project and fostered great insights and ideas.

The Mucker network has since been established at BMT as a permanent and pioneering feature of its overall EDI work. They hold senior leadership to account and are steering through change.

Actions:

The project delivered a tangible set of actions which BMT can align with its own business planning aims and support internally. As one staff member commented, the project helped them achieve.

> ***Some clearly defined actions we're able to carry out that address some of the challenges of class inequality and gave us the confidence were acting in an efficient way***

The project helped participants to focus their aspirations for BMT; as one participant explained:

> ***[My ultimate vision is] confidence in knowing that working class employees are not relegated to specific roles or levels of the structure for any reason other than they choose and desire to be there, and the data to support that.***

The actions from the project are being developed by BMT. A new EDI Circle has been created to take an overview of the action plan and support with resources where required.

CHALLENGES AND LEARNING FROM THE PROJECT – SMALL STEPS FORWARD

One challenge was gaining engagement with the whole workforce. While senior leadership were very supportive (and this is critical), not all employees attended the training or responded to the consultation. Learning from the project shows that a 'small steps' approach can work. Start with a "coalition of the willing' and focus on the basics to get your house in order first. As one participant advised:

> ***There's a gap between the vision, which is aspirational, and the practice, which is often lacking. The focus needs to be on getting the basics right, and our house in order***

Another challenge is the time this takes. The Birmingham Mucker Reps all commented on the challenge of making change happen while still delivering their everyday work. As such, expect change to be incremental rather than radical.

SHARING LEARNING FROM THE PROJECT: PHASE TWO

In 2026 we received some follow up funding from Royal Holloway to share the learning from the project.

Events

In May 2026, we delivered an event as part of the Museum and Heritage Show. We presented the research, outlined the project, and 'interviewed' a panel of BMT staff about it. There were over 120 attendees, and a healthy discussion on how this work can be extended. See here for a full recording.

The evaluation of this event showed that the audience appreciated hearing the combination of research findings and Birmingham Museums Trust's experience in addressing these challenges.







Photos by Kathleen Lawther

Really helpful! I appreciated learning from multiple roles within the project

Very useful to hear from leadership, how they can improve, be more open and inclusive, supportive as well as hear from staff from working-class backgrounds

Hearing about the research and the way it has been utlised is really helpful

The evaluation also showed us how people intended to use the ideas and learning from the session, including reviewing job descriptions and the interview process, removing the word “entry-level” from job roles, ending the use of fixed-term contracts, and starting conversations about class and feeling more confident about their own careers.

In November 2026, we are running an event as part of the Museums Association Conference, in which we will explore the challenges of addressing class inequality and offer solutions.

FREE TOOLS FOR YOU AND YOUR MUSEUM

We have also created a new web page on the Museum as Muck website with free tools to tackle class inequality, including:

What is class inequality? Infographic

Based on Dr Sam Evans's research, this provides an overview of three types of class inequality within museum work and the reasons they persist.

Checklist: How inclusive is your museum?

Find out how your museum might be contributing to, or challenging, the problem of class inequality.

What's it like trying to tackle class inequality?

BMT staff talk about the challenges of tackling class inequality and provide some advice at the Museum & Heritage Show 2026.
Watch the event recording.

Example action plan

See the actions that BMT has planned to tackle class inequality.

Where can you start: a model for change

Tackling class (or any form of) inequality requires an organisation to change. Use this Model for Change as a roadmap for your organisation to think through class inequality. Where can you start, what can you do and who do you need to involve?

You can find all these tools at:
www.museumasmuck.co.uk/workforce

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FIND OUT MORE

To get advice on tackling class inequality at your museum, contact Museum as Muck at museumasmuck@gmail.com.

MUSEUM AS MUCK

For more information on the research underpinning this, contact Dr Sam Evans at Royal Holloway, Samantha.evans@rhul.ac.uk

This case study was written by Dr Sam Evans and designed by Fran Riando. The project was funded by the Economic and Social Research Council via the Social Science Impact Accelerator programme at Royal Holloway.

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