

Equity and Inclusion for Museums: introductory resources

Diversity and Inclusion are central to a fair society and to the success of institutions in being relevant to communities. Isilda Almeida and Maurice Davies have been working with Museum Development UK (MDUK), with support from the Association of Independent Museums (AiM), to create a programme to support museums in England and Wales to improve their understanding of Equity, Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI). The programme, Equity and Inclusion for Museums (EIM), will increase participants' knowledge and skills around Equity and Inclusion issues and support organisations to have conversations and lay the foundations for creating change. To find out more about EIM please visit <https://mduk.org.uk/equity-inclusion-programme/>

We recognise organisations are at different stages of engagement with equitable and inclusive practise and with that in mind we have chosen a set of introductory resources in different formats and media, outlining key concepts, inclusive language and examples of practise from the UK sector.

These [Equity, Equality, Diversity and Inclusion](#) resources have been selected to introduce how museums can engage by starting with the nine 'protected characteristics' in the Equalities Act 2010. We hope these resources will encourage museum staff, trustees, collaborators and volunteers to explore how they can embed equitable practices into museums, particularly the content of museum displays and programming.

We have created a Reflection Framework for you to use whilst reviewing the resources. [Download the Reflection Framework](#).

The Equality Act 2010

The Equality Act 2010 is an important piece of legislation that safeguards against discrimination, sets out recognised forms of discrimination and how you can protect people's rights. It replaced the Sex Discrimination Act 1975, the Race Relations Act 1976 and the Disability Discrimination Act 1995.

The Equality Act 2010 identifies nine protected characteristics:

- age
- disability
- gender reassignment

- marriage and civil partnership
- pregnancy and maternity
- religion or belief
- race
- sex
- sexual orientation

Age

Museums have done much in the past few decades to embrace young ‘family’ audiences. Now, as museums work across sectors contributing to health and wellbeing agendas, they are engaging more with older people: those who are isolated, have lived experience of dementia, reside in care homes. This is not only as part of outreach and community programmes but also in the context of contemporary collecting and oral histories, thereby making the collections more inclusive and representative of different past and present lived experiences.

- Age-Friendly Museums Checklist https://www.culturehealthandwellbeing.org.uk/sites/default/files/2019-12/MDNW_Age-Friendly-Museums-checklist_Sept20192.pdf
- The UK’s Ageing Population: Challenges and opportunities for museums and galleries <https://www.ageing.ox.ac.uk/download/173>

Disability

Being accessible and welcoming to people with lived experience of disabilities involves considerations in terms of physical spaces, [accessible communications](#), [website accessibility guidelines](#), some experiences of [neurodiversity](#) and emotional wellbeing. Museums which are [representative of a workforce](#) with different abilities, ways of learning and experiences will necessarily be more equitable and diverse.

Having conversations is one of the key ways to overcome barriers and [language](#) is a significant part of this.

These issues are familiar to museums but there less attention is paid to how disabled people are represented in museums, so we give some examples of good interpretation and programming practice below.

- Reflecting on museums and the 25th anniversary of the Disability Discrimination Act <https://www.museumsassociation.org/museums-journal/opinion/2020/11/there-is-a-strong-feeling-among-disabled-people-that-we-have-been-losing-ground/>
- The Department of Museum Studies at Leicester University has explored ways of improving representation of disability in museums. There’s a brief overview of the department’s work here

<https://le.ac.uk/rcmg/reframing-difference-and-disability> Resources from the Rethinking Disability Representation in Museums and Galleries, including the project report and nine case studies, can be accessed here
<https://le.ac.uk/rcmg/research-archive/rethinking-disability-representation>

- Curating for Change explores how disabled people can be more involved in museums as audiences and as staff
<http://www.accentuateuk.org/news?item=1325> It includes discussion of the benefits for disabled people of Covid-induced changes in museums
- Shifting Perspectives: Opening up museums and galleries to blind and partially sighted people
<https://www.culturehealthandwellbeing.org.uk/sites/default/files/2019-08/rnib-shifting-perspectives-book-lo-res-20-04-2011.pdf>
- This podcast about the Wellcome Collection's Being Human gallery includes discussion of working with and being accountable to disabled consultants
<https://www.aam-us.org/2019/11/26/museopunks-episode-40-a-very-human-exhibition/>
- This five minute video looks at personalised access for disabled people to art displays <https://youtu.be/LZUR7lz0YIE>
- This one hour webinar gives a range of useful information on improving disability access and representation at museums
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PDUVvkzgsbj0>
- Museums have been involved in the mental health and wellbeing agenda long before the pandemic. [Museums Joining the Mental Health Conversation - MuseumNext](#)

Gender reassignment

According to [LGBT Lawyers](#), approximately 1% of the UK population identifies as transgender or non-binary. [Language](#) is central to gaining a better understanding of gender identities and having inclusive conversations. Exploring identity and belonging is a fundamental element in the role of museums and heritage organisations. A good starting point is to never make assumptions over anyone's gender identity (or otherwise) just by looking at them. Here is some useful information on pronouns people use <https://sublimemarch.itch.io/pronouns-101-zine>

Here are examples of work in museums:

- The Museum of Transology <https://www.museumoftransology.com/>, winner of the Activist Museum Award 2020/21

- Event recording: Museums and the Transgender Tipping Point <https://le.ac.uk/rcmg/research-archive/transgender-tipping-point>
- <https://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/sutton-house-and-breakers-yard/features/sutton-house-queered>
- [Museum of Transology Twitter feed](#)
- [Museum of Transology Instagram feed](#)

Pregnancy and maternity

Employers that provide good support to staff in pregnancy and parenthood will be more likely to have higher employee satisfaction and retention. Security and reassurance are crucial. But this is not just a Human Resources issue. It is important that museums are welcoming spaces for [pregnant people and new parents or carers](#). This involves not only being family friendly but also accommodating the needs of these audiences such as baby changing facilities, quiet feeding spaces and opportunities for parents to interact with other parents and carers in museum soft play areas and other spaces and activities where they can enjoy safe play with their babies and children.

Pregnancy and parenthood are significant life events and of course, part of our social, medical, economic, and political histories. They should be visible, well represented and explored in museum collections.

We have uncovered the following examples:

- [Museum of pregnancy and families – International Council of Museums \(icom-cc2014.org\)](#)
- [Pregnancy Corset | Staff Picks | Maidstone Museum](#)
- [Go See 'Portraying Pregnancy' at London's Foundling Museum — &SISTERS \(andsisters.com\)](#)
- [Renaissance childbirth - Victoria and Albert Museum \(vam.ac.uk\)](#)
- [Make Room for Baby - Museum of Science and Industry \(msichicago.org\)](#)

Race

[Race is a social construct](#), defined and imposed by a dominant group in society and with no biological or scientific basis. The artificial concept of race has been the foundation of further theories that have aimed to justify the oppression of people who are not white. This creation of a narrative of inferiority has taken part, sometimes subtly, in social and cultural institutions. Racist narratives and assumptions,

therefore, inevitably underlie the creation of many museum collections and how they [have been interpreted](#). History is written by the winners and in Europe and the British Empire, the winners tend to have been white, wealthy, able-bodied men. There is a call to 'decolonise' museums to address their implicit racism (and sexism and ableism).

The Museums Association guidance, [Supporting Decolonisation in Museums](#), aims to empower more people to take action and lead change as museums address the legacy of British colonialism.

The National Trust's recent Interim [Report](#) on the Connections between Colonialism and Properties now in the Care of the National Trust Including Links with Historic Slavery, reveals the often hidden legacy of history's winners in our supposedly neutral heritage institutions. As well as the much discussed and sometimes controversial gazetteer of 'problematic' National Trust properties, the report has useful short chapters on several aspects of Britain's colonial history.

How do we talk about such an [uncomfortable](#) and emotionally charged topic of race? What words should we use? This is not straightforward, as acceptable language tends to shift over time and can vary between places and people. BAME is beginning to be seen as problematic because it groups together different ethnicities, identities and geographies into one blanket term. There are many discussions on the [most appropriate terminology](#) to use and museums should consider these not only in their external communications but also internally, with their staff, volunteers, partner organisations and other stakeholders. Individuals may have their own preference. For instance, they may prefer to use "people of diverse ethnicities" to "people of colour" or vice versa.

Religion

Addressing religion is complex. Issues to consider include what is sacred and for whom, and social and political contexts. The English took part in the first Crusades, and welcomed French Huguenot and Jewish refugees. England separated itself from the Catholic Church and used religion as a power tool in the process of "civilising" others to colonise their life and land, including the role of missionaries, the source of many items in museum collections. Because of the unequal power relationships between collectors and the communities there are now inevitably calls for [repatriation](#). There are here are many different faiths and world views beyond [Judaism, Christianity, Hinduism, Buddhism and Islamism](#).

- Rapid overview of trends in museums presenting religions
<https://www.mdpi.com/2077-1444/10/12/656/htm>
- Interview about changing museum approaches to religion
<https://glencairnmuseum.org/newsletter/2017/3/27/religious-objects-in-museums-an-interview-with-crispin-paine>
- Religion, Collections and Heritage Group (includes a reading list)
<https://religioncollections.wordpress.com/>

- Video recording of discussion Museums, Religion, and the Work of Reconciliation and Remembrance <https://www.jmberlin.de/en/discussion-program-museums-and-religion-between-commemoration-and-reparation>

Sex

Women have been significantly underrepresented throughout history and in art. They are stereotypically portrayed as family caregivers, nurturers, homemakers, “the weaker sex” and their achievements have been silenced in patriarchal societies that promote and perpetuate male power.

Non-white, disabled, transgender or working-class women are even more under-represented in museum versions of history.

Again, language can be destructive or empowering. We are not just thinking about misogynistic language but also gendered language that excludes women. Examples of this are manned, chairman, manpower, manmade. Consider this in your communications. Words play an important part in thinking. The exclusion of women in the language we use to communicate our ideas disempowers women and girls from taking active and positive roles in society.

- The importance of women’s history for museums <https://eastendwomensmuseum.org/why-women>
- Museum Space Invaders: Feminists in museums and heritage, creating sector change <https://mspaceinvaders.com/> with extensive guide to Feminist resources <https://mspaceinvaders.com/reading/>
- Improving the representation of female artists: Where are all the women? <https://www.museumsassociation.org/museums-journal/features/2021/05/where-are-the-women/> *Please note this needs an MA login*
- [Interrogating](#) women and domesticity. The Dusters project
- [National Women's History Museum \(womenshistory.org\)](https://www.womenshistory.org/)
- [Women's History | Historic England](#)
- [Welsh women's history | National Museum Wales](#)

Sexual Orientation

Museum interpretation has traditionally been presented from a heterosexual perspective, largely ignoring other sexualities despite the fact that this is not fully representative of human history. A wide range of museums are now broadening their

representation of gender and sexual orientation. As an indication of the opportunities available to museums, [Manchester Museum](#)'s LGBTQ+ History Month Tour explores how stereotypes have impacted on the research and interpretation of natural history.

To be truly representative of different relationships and families should be inclusive of different forms of marriage and civil partnerships both in their staff policies and in the narratives of their objects and sites, as this example from National Museums Liverpool illustrates [Civil partnerships and marriages | National Museums Liverpool \(liverpoolmuseums.org.uk\)](#).

As with all other areas of inclusive practice, it is important to consider the discourse and [terminologies](#) relating to the experiences of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Questioning Plus communities (LGBTQ+).

Some more resources:

- [LGBTQ+ History & Practice – Discover \(brightonmuseums.org.uk\)](#)
- [Uncovering LGBTQ+ rural histories in archives – The MERL \(reading.ac.uk\)](#)
- Reflections from Bodmin Keep Museum on the challenges and opportunities of presenting LGBTQ+ lives and objects <https://bodminkeep.org/where-is-our-lgbtq-history/>
- Guide to LGBTQ+ History Resources <https://historyatkingston.wordpress.com/lgbt-history-resources/>
- Overview of the National Trust/ University of Leicester Prejudice and Pride experimental interpretation, including report on visitor reactions <https://le.ac.uk/rcmg/research-archive/prejudice-and-pride> and the related report Prejudice and Pride: LGBTQ heritage and its contemporary implications here https://leicester.figshare.com/articles/report/Prejudice_and_Pride_LGBTQ_heritage_and_its_contemporary_implications/10207328/1
- Video: How Museums Can Expand Narratives With LGBTQ+ Interpretation <https://www.museumnext.com/article/museums-expand-narratives-with-lgbt-interpretation/> *Please note there are no subtitles available*
- Video: How To Queer Your Museum by Ancient House Thetford Teenage History Club <https://lgbtplushistorymonth.co.uk/2020/02/how-to-queer-your-museum-by-ancient-house-teenage-history-club/>
- Queering Museums podcast <https://www.listennotes.com/podcasts/queering-museums-queering-museums-UO1RtAyyv8EK/>
- Local heritage and LGBTQ+ histories podcast https://forartsake.co.uk/sean_curran/

Beyond the Equality Act 2010

Diversity and discrimination are not only about the nine unique protected characteristics. Human beings and their life experiences are varied and complex, and identities are not simple. In one individual we will find the confluence of different identities.

Consider women: An elderly white woman will experience different forms of discrimination to a young black woman or a disabled transgender woman. We call this overlapping of identities, [intersectionality](#). This recognises that each individual's lived experience is unique, valuable and important to respect, listen to, and consider.

There are other factors that contribute to exclusion in society, such as class, socioeconomic status, body weight, learning styles, behavioural preferences and some experiences of neurodiversity.

Get inspired: Museum Activism

As institutions that strive to deliver public benefit, museums have a [duty](#) to champion social justice and equity. This may mean being a [platform for dialogue and reflection, a catalyst for change and or a model of the change we want to see in society](#) through allyship and [decolonisation](#). Some examples can be explored below:

- [Campaigning - People's History Museum: The national museum of democracy \(phm.org.uk\)](https://www.phm.org.uk)
- [The Activist Museum Award 2021-2022 | Research Centre for Museums and Galleries \(RCMG\) | University of Leicester](#)
- [Activism - Museums Association](#)