

Study Name: How do ethics influence the development of policies for accessing public collections which are essentially restricted by law: A case study of the Royal Armouries.

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Interview Transcript: Laura Bell – Director of Collections (Royal Armouries), 1/8/2022

SB: The first thing I'd like to ask you today is what does ethics bring to mind in relation to the Armouries' collections and specifically the Armouries' weapons collections?

LB: With ethics, it's the fair and equal side of museums work. I think for me, we've spoken about it before, there's not having access to everything for certain individuals legally in a physical sense. But then there's also the other side of how we square the intellectual access to the type of collection it is and needing to be sensitive as to what items we're using specifically, or just generally what their purpose is. So there's those two elements, it's all around accessibility I think, and not just in a physical sense, though that of course is a more of an issue than the others. That's the immediate [thing that] springs to mind.

SB: I suppose that's the thing to tease out. The physical, and then what can the Armouries do beyond that given the physical restrictions on the collections? Very interesting. How would you perceive that ethical issues affect your own practice on a day-to-day level and your own involvement in the Armouries' work?

LB: Beyond what we've just mentioned, probably not a lot because the baseline is always we're here for public benefit, we're here for access for the public, engagement with the public, that's the baseline. It's how we manage to do those things, that's the issue, the practicalities around that and where we draw the lines. For those prohibited persons physical access isn't an option, but we can always look beyond that to other ways of accessing information or knowledge around, or engagement with. There would be sensitivities around that, depending on it being case by case, the type of crime this person had been involved in. Do we want to start talking about why a gun can be taken apart in this way? We've just got to look into it on a case-by-case basis. Thankfully, not many prohibited persons request physical access to behind the scenes of the collection, and those people can see those items in the galleries. A lot of the items in the galleries, anyway, because they're secure and behind the display cases, so there's other layers of security. I think it's perhaps more around the sensitivities to it and I think that's talked about a lot more these days, particularly with the war in Ukraine, the shootings that have happened in the United States recently. How we share information. I know, for example, the What Is This Weapon Wednesday

that we do on Twitter and YouTube, we did one at the normal scheduled time, Wednesday, but it was straight after the news about a shooting from Tuesday, I think it was, and some people said you shouldn't be sharing information about weapons and being so insensitive the day after. We disagreed institutionally because that is what we do, it was scheduled, and it wasn't relevant to that case. But you can see how public perception, and it was only a few people, most people love seeing those videos with Jonathan [Ferguson, Keeper of Firearms and Artillery]. But I think it's the sensitivities these days, the amount of calls for gun crime in particular to reduce in certain countries and how that would affect the information we provide. But, ultimately, the baseline is that we share our collection and we engage with the public. We've just got to find a way of doing that sensitively and being aware of what's happening, which most of the time we seem to be able to balance out.

SB: Yeah. What would be the processes and the procedures addressing these sensitivities within the Armouries? How would that proceed in practice?

LB: I don't think there is a set procedure for that type of thing. It's, again, case by case. A lot of the stuff that comes out in the press in some form is reviewed by the executive board. At the start of every executive board meeting there is a RA [Royal Armouries] in the news, museums in the news section, and Florence [Symington], our Head of Marketing and Communications, takes us through what's happened this past week, and if we need to respond to anything. If these things come up, we speak about them in the EB [Executive Board], that's filtered down to leadership group. If there's any decisions to be made about what goes on social media, press releases, that's an EB-DG [Director General?] decision anyway. Florence is very good at letting us know. I can imagine there'll be things that slip through the net because there isn't a procedure in place. But I'm not sure, because social media is quite fast moving, you could put a formal procedure in place every time, you have to just have people on the frontline monitoring it and raising queries as and when things come up for EB to review.

SB: That makes sense. It's very hard to predict how social media will evolve, and what will be the major issues. There has to be that flexibility within the system.

LB: Yeah. Not saying we might not change it at some point, and I think people know what the procedure is when they do have a query about it, but it's not written down anywhere.

SB: Yeah, that's really interesting. You've already spoken a little bit about your role within developing ethical practice and ethical conduct at the Armouries. Could you just speak a bit more about that in general, possibly more in relation to the physical collections aspects?

LB: So in terms of my involvement with that, the actual physical, practical implementation of how we deal with it? It was setting up the access to stores forms, the guidance that surrounds it, providing that training to staff, so that you know you don't ask them the question, you get them to read the document. Again, being sensitive to who these individuals might be. There's only so far that you can really go with it, because that's a legislative requirement. Ethically, I would expect – we've not had this in my time – but if someone raised concerns, they were a prohibited person, they were really upset that they couldn't access behind the scenes, then that would need to come to myself or the senior collections team for review about what we might be able to do if we felt obliged to provide another layer of engagement that they could legally access. Because ethically we want everyone to be able to access the collection in some form, knowledge around it. Again, it's about the different layers, different journeys in, different routes in. We've got lots of ways we can engage with the public, it might not be quite what they want. But in a physical sense, we have to draw the line when it comes to legislation.

SB: I suppose it's finding creative ways to ensure access. Is there a way of drawing the line at any point where it's ethically appropriate to provide access in these ways, and then you cross a certain line, and then it's ethically inappropriate to do so? Or is it very much a case-by-case scenario?

LB: Ethically, the baseline is everyone should be able to access the collection, so that's what we work to. If we can accommodate anyone's requests, we will. It's difficult to say in a general sense without a case-by-case scenario how that might work. I guess if you were talking about a group of individuals coming through and we found out that this individual was involved in something, then we'd have to work around that. But we've never had that thankfully. What might be interesting is to look into the types of people who do request behind the scenes and why certain individuals don't. I guess that comes from the audience needs and the audience development work, the types of audience that are coming to us and how we can develop that audience further. I think as we work through that process and bring different segments to the Armouries, we might have more issues arising but more people coming through the doors.

SB: Yeah. It's always maintaining that balance. What I was trying to say with that question is, is there an ethical imperative for public safety? Is there a line there that goes beyond the legal, where it might be legal for someone to access the collections but an instance where it's not ethically acceptable that you can think of? Or is that very much again, if it happens, we'd discuss it, but you can't really predict it, really?

LB: Yeah I think, exactly that in terms of process. We've had scenarios where individuals have been gun-mad, for want of a better term, but they're really interested to the point of obsessive. We've perhaps not realised that before they got into stores and they start picking stuff up, they start moving the mechanics, and they start pointing it about, even though they've had all of that guidance at that point. We would – and I think we have done on a couple of occasions, certainly not when I've been in the room, but I've heard of it – say your session's over, we're not comfortable. That's an ethical response because it's a health and safety thing, but it's also a comfortable level for staff to feel safe and appropriate in that scenario because these are weapons. Of course, most of them have been checked and that's absolutely fine, but we always say you shouldn't point guns at people. You shouldn't point them at certain areas, you shouldn't be dry cocking the gun, or anything like that. If we see that happening, it's a quick, your session's over, we don't feel comfortable with you being in stores. Technically, they would legally be allowed in. That's a scenario I can imagine. I can't think of any others, but again case by case. I think if our staff is trained, and if at any point, because of our types of collections, they feel uncomfortable, they have the right to say no at any point during that session.

SB: This is something that's really interesting as I've got into the subject, it's not just the safety of the audiences, it is the safety of the staff as well. Even though they are trained and they know what they're doing, the institution has a responsibility for them as well. I suppose it's better to be over-cautious and over-prudent at the end of the day. That's where the need for access and the need for safety come up against each other quite dramatically.

LB: Yeah. Safety for the objects as well, but that's something everywhere has to deal with.

SB: Well that leads me quite nicely onto one of my other questions. What are the fundamental values and principles that inform the Armouries' treatment of its weapons holdings? We've already discussed a few of them, but it would be interesting to see how you would define those a bit more clearly.

LB: Again, it's having the baseline of public benefit, public access, public engagement, and then it's the levels of protection you put above that. The standards and legislation that we meet as museums, of course. Then on top of that, those for weapons collections and those are what we pin everything to. Values and principles are just that really. Then it's the policies and procedures that we put in place around those things that have been drawn up and tweaked as things have happened or not happened over the years. I can't really think of another way to describe that but tell me if I'm missing something with that question.

SB: I wanted to hear your thoughts before I'd share mine. The way I've seen it, reading everything, speaking to people is that there are three really: there's the need to provide access, which you mentioned, and the need to preserve objects as well, and they're always in tension with each other. That's the case for pretty much every museum, Armouries and otherwise. Then in the case of the Armouries and certain other museums, there is the need to maintain safety, the public, and that complicates both of the other two principles. That's how I've conceptualised it. Would you think that's a fair characterisation?

LB: Yes, obviously the preservation of objects, I take that as a given. But yeah, you're absolutely right, that is one of the fundamentals, and then access. Health and safety I don't see as being as high up. That's not because I don't think it's important, it is. It's just I think people can get confused, particularly when it comes to firearms, of thinking how unsafe they can potentially be. Edged weapons, absolutely. Explosives, absolutely. But firearms are not readily dangerous without the ammunition, they're just a metal lump that you could hit someone with, but you could do that with any object. Absolutely, health and safety and that's how we've maintained things. But I think because that's something that's so far down embedded, I wouldn't put that as high up in our consciousness right now.

SB: Yeah, it's intrinsic to everything you do.

LB: Yeah. But I know exactly what you're saying, and I don't think it's wrong, I just probably have the other two higher up. But that's interesting to hear your thoughts after you've read everything, you've been doing some work to see what you think the top-level things are. The other idea I guess, when you're thinking about it in the wider sense, instead of just from an ethical and legal sense, which is what I initially took the question to be is what we collect, how we develop the collection, how that responds to what's happening today, and how do we do that

ethically. The various cases that have happened in the news, we know at some point we should talk about that. But again, it's managing the sensitivities around that. At what point is it okay to speak openly about those weapons, how they were made, and what that meant? We collect things in order to be able to share the story of arms and armour, its development over time, and its use in society. I think that's a big value and principle that we uphold. How we share that is another question. We need to maintain the collection, so that we can talk about its history for today and future audiences. That's a big one for me.

SB: Yeah, it's that idea of historical memory, when is it okay and appropriate to talk about something that's really quite sensitive. It's this idea that the Armouries, and all national collections, are supposed to exist for perpetuity, so it's taking that long view as well.

LB: Yeah, absolutely. You could look at it even just in the sense of the PAS 197 [Code of Practice for Cultural Collections Management] basic framework terms, what your requirements to be doing with a collection or what you should be doing, the development, the access, the information, care, and conservation.

SB: Yeah, all the bread-and-butter things.

LB: Yeah, and those are the baselines. They've been used for a long time for that reason because that is what all museums try to do, and are values that they uphold for very good reasons.

SB: Yeah, thank you. That's all been really insightful. Moving on a little bit, you've been speaking about PAS 197, which is a key professional framework and we've mentioned the codes of ethics in our previous discussion, but how do you think those codes of ethics relate to other professional frameworks in the field? Say like [Museum] Accreditation, say like PAS 197, and all of that, how does that all coalesce to generate the duties that the Armouries has to fulfil as a national museum and as a museum of arms and armour?

LB: Thinking about the MA [Museums Association] *Code of Ethics* for a start, it's pretty vague in many ways, I think intentionally. But the last few years have seen certainly the MA invoke and inspire social responsibility, I wouldn't call it as far as activism necessarily, but it's that they're pushing more along those lines. In terms of its impact on weapons collections, there hasn't been much yet. It's things like the colonial, decolonisation discussions and, what else, climate change. They're wanting museums to get more involved in things that you wouldn't

traditionally think museums were involved in, but they want to show that you're there for the public in many ways and how can your collection tell those stories? There might be other ways that we can do that. Of course, our collection has been used in battles, colonial wars. We have items from the opposition in many cases. Legally, you can remove someone's ability to attack or defend themselves. Ethically, that will be a question for us, at some point, how proactive we want to be around that. Of course, the *National Heritage Act* [1983] says we're not allowed to deaccession for that reason. There's a lot of talk at the moment amongst nationals [museums] with the amount of calls on restitution and repatriation, for example, about what we're going to do, whether we try and advocate for a move towards the boards of trustees for the nationals taking on that responsibility. I'm not sure that's the right thing to do, that's just another group who've not democratically been elected. I think both ways have issues. It will come to us at some point. I think what's interesting about our collection when it comes to these ethical debates, these cultural debates, is that people don't necessarily immediately put a call out for things like weapons unless they're nicely inscribed, they're gold, they've got silver plate on them, they're aesthetically pleasing. I don't know if we've had this conversation before. It will happen, but it's not the immediate request, like the Benin stuff or anything like that. Actually, when you look back in history, when we looked into our Benin cannon, they were just never recorded appropriately, it was just artillery pieces. Whereas those things that are aesthetically pleasing were itemised with a significant amount of detail, and I think that just shows you what value people place on our type of collection from a cultural sense and their sense of belonging. That is going to be a question that we need to face one day, because these things were involved in those wars. But are they the things that people are requesting back? No, not right now.

SB: Yeah, they're quite vivid reminders of perhaps less glorious, less palatable aspects of history, both from a colonial perspective and from the colonised perspective. It's a really interesting one. I know that the Armouries already has its display on the Indian War of Rebellion, so I can see that it's already making steps towards that.

LB: We need to do much more and we need to get the other side of the story to a certain extent, and we do have an inclusive narratives project that we're working on which will try to address some of this. But I think when you think about it from a weapons collections holding perspective, it isn't the immediate thing that comes to the public's mind. We've been given a bit

of time to deal with it. We know we need to deal with it, but we're not getting as many requests as, say, the BM [British Museum] or the V&A are. That will affect the development of our collection in future, at some point it will have an impact.

SB: Yeah, food for thought.

LB: Yeah, I mean that's a whole other PhD, I think. But when you're talking about ethics and the things that MA call for as part of their ethics, the working groups that they've got, and the guidance that provides, that's something at the moment that will have a big impact on our collection at some point.

SB: It's the fact that all of these issues are interlinked. It's very difficult to address something like access without also addressing collections development, disposal, accessioning and all of those sorts of things. It's really interesting. I was just thinking the way that the MA code of ethics is structured now is that it's got the main code and the additional guidance. Do you think that's a good way of being able to address more specific concerns? Not having it within the main body, having something that can be consulted and is accessible, but not detracting from the main big messages and principles that are there in the MA Code.

LB: I think it makes it easier for museums to abide by them, take note of them, and shape them within their own institution's needs. I think some of the guidance perhaps, I mean I've not looked at it in a while, some of the guidance has a bit of an agenda sometimes, but the bigger headline stuff I think is vague enough and pretty good in the most part. I think it's useful to separate it out like that, and I think a lot of museums have found it easier in that sense.

SB: What agenda do you think it's trying to get across in certain aspects?

LB: Just the whole activism thing, and the whole debate about the ICOM [International Council of Museums] museum definition, we've probably spoken about this before. There's probably two sides to this, but we have to do what we do as a museum first and foremost, and then how we engage with the public should be up to those institutions based on their audience needs and their types of collections. It shouldn't be anyone telling you that this is what a museum is, because that's the basic fundamentals of what museums do. That's why, what was it, 90 countries threw out the last ICOM definition, because it was too heavy on the social agenda. Museums are here in perpetuity, if we talk to social agendas today – we can and we should within other forms and

programmes that we do. But should it be what defines us? No it can't be, because we're bigger than that.

SB: I suppose it's always historically contingent, so what might be socially important, and the whole thing of activism, might not be important in 50-100 years.

LB: Exactly. What's ethical today, and what's going to be ethical tomorrow? Perception of terms varies all the time.

SB: What was ethical 100 years ago is very different to what is ethical now.

LB: Exactly. We have to hold on to who we are fundamentally, and we can do programmes that talk to today's audiences, and we should be allowed the freedom to do that. I think whenever it gets too close to telling us what our programme should be, that's an issue.

SB: It's so interesting how the ethical can very quickly become political in that respect. I suppose the thing that underpins all of this is that ethics is contingent, and that's something that we always have to remember. That was really insightful, thank you. Going back to the narrower discussion about codes of ethics, do you think there is room – in like the additional guidance – for more specific issues to be discussed like security or safety? I think the MA one currently has a section about sensitive collections as well. Do you think that's a good approach to that sort of issue or are there better ways of doing it, do you think? Like subject specific ways of doing it?

LB: Yeah, I think we probably talked about this before, but I always err more towards the side of subject specific because that gives you the better guidance, the better conversation, the better sounding board. If you try to generalise too far, it doesn't become useful. I think these bigger bodies can provide frameworks to work within and then what sits underneath them are those subjects specialist bodies, groups, areas that then tackle and provide guidance for those with smaller holdings. But they provide the guidance, and we wouldn't say that we would provide the guidance on archaeological collections. I think it needs to be layered and I don't think these big institutions could start doing that. They could help promote it, they could have links to that guidance, they could provide contacts if someone asked the query, they could be the liaison. But they shouldn't be the ones, because there's just a small group of them, acting on behalf of museums that they need to provide as much general framework for us all to work within for all of our specialisms and then layers underneath.

SB: Yeah, that makes sense. The follow-on question is do you think there is room for a code of ethics for weapons? Or is that too prescriptive in a sense?

LB: I'm just trying to think what that might look like.

SB: Because there is, as we've spoken about before, this phantom ICOMAM [International Committee for Museums and Collections of Arms and Military History] code of ethics that apparently exists. But yeah, it'd be interesting to see what that looks like, if it does exist.

LB: Have you spoken to Mark Murray-Flutter [Senior Curator of Firearms] about that? I can't remember where we got to with it.

SB: No, I haven't. I spoke to Katie [Robson, Registrar] and she has no clue. I'll see if Jen [Kaines, Head of Collections Services] knows anything about it. I'll keep going.

LB: The people who are likely to know about it are Mark, who sits on the ICOMAM committee, and those who are actively involved with ICOMAM. I don't think Katie and Jen are, but see what they say. I mean there could be something, a code, a form of ethics that sit around it, absolutely. I'd need to see what that would look like and it is something that we could work on. But I do think it's so case by case with a lot of this, with codes of ethics that go beyond the law, you cement it and people follow it as guidance. There'd be a lot of groups involved with that, how far you go, and sensitivities. There's a lot to say about keeping things vague, so that it can be adapted as necessary to meet the needs of that scenario or that case. But I'm not saying that there couldn't be, there could be something very general. But it'd have to be general for weapons, as general as the other ones really in that sense, so at what point does it not become useful and actually just having guidance on procedures would be better? Because ethics are quite often determined, as I say, case by case and on the ground on that day, and you want staff to be able to have that flexibility as well.

SB: Yeah, that was something that very much Katie was expressing. That's how she responds to ethical challenges, she will do it on a case-by-case basis. That's very interesting. Do you think groups like ICOMAM and the Museum Weapons Group are effective forums for discussing these ethical issues, even if they don't provide an entrenched framework for them?

LB: ICOMAM, probably not. They're a lovely group, but it's more military collections, they don't say they specialise in weapons. A lot of them are specialists in weapons, but no they're a military-led group, which comes with a very diverse collection of items that isn't just weapons related. Museums Weapons Group, yes. It could probably do more on that score, but if you were debating an ethical question, it'd have to be a scenario that applies to every institution, for it to be useful, to have it in that forum. I think again, a lot of these ethical things are dependent on what's actually happening on the ground. We certainly feedback when it comes to fees, changes in legislation, as you know, that group is very useful for that because that talks about the impact on them. But ethically, at what point do you want to start telling people how their institution should be governed ethically? They've got different corporate plans, different objectives, different funding arrangements. To go down the route of an ethical framework for how you apply that to managing your collection, I don't know. Other than saying you need to manage the collection, I think it might go too far.

SB: Would there be room for a network for advice perhaps, rather than anything more formal? So, here are the staff members at various institutions, if an ethical dilemma comes up and you're not quite a 100 percent sure of what to do, maybe get in touch.

LB: Absolutely. Yeah, that's what we do, generally. Although we want to think about a Subject Specialist Network where it's clearer. I think it's known for a lot of people that if that question comes up, they'll come to us or they'll talk to other people with the same type of collection. I was just speaking to the police about this last week, the museum community is so close-knit that they know it's good to seek advice from other colleagues with similar holdings, so I think that's done informally anyway. We have been talking about a Subject Specialist Network that would provide those links, contacts, and guidance documents.

SB: Yeah, that makes sense. Can you think of any examples where the Armouries has drawn on other institutions or other case studies when it's tackled and confronted its own ethical issues?

LB: Not really, in my time. Nothing that's been practically put in place. Again, there's the whole sensitivities thing that we've spoken about, being tuned into what's going on around the world, and how that has an impact on how you provide information about our collection. There's the practical elements of, we've spoken about this before, IWM [Imperial War Museum] tethered their guns to displays. Have we implemented that? No. Does it have an impact on us?

Sometimes, because people ask us about it. But in general, I think because we've been doing it for so long, I think a lot of what happens is people ask us. I don't think that's me or anyone being big-headed about it, I think just we've been holding these items for such a long time that I think if we're not comfortable with what we're doing and how we're doing it then we would look elsewhere. But I don't think we've had a lot of need to. This is an aside, but I have been thinking about going to other military weapons collections and speaking to them about the security arrangements they have in place for large gun holdings and how that compares to the NFC's [National Firearms Centre's] access and security, so that we can start advocating for slightly less restrictions from the police. So that we can get in, not saying all of the public would come round, but other groups, not just researchers or staff or the Service Level Agreement public bodies. How we can expand that slightly, not going mad, but getting charity groups in who it would be useful for them when they've suffered PTSD and whatnot. We're thinking along those lines, how we can expand access and advocate for greater access to certain areas. I'd like to see how our security compares with military collections, so going outside of the sector.

SB: That's really interesting because obviously it's not only museums that hold weapons and manage them in various ways. What about the commercial side? Is there anything that the Armouries can learn from weapons dealers or auctioneers, that side of things? Are there ethical lessons there?

LB: I mean they have a different set of rules placed upon them. When you're an RFD [registered firearms dealer], an individual RFD, then you can do different things. You've got a different level of responsibility, different restrictions, so it would be difficult to compare. We use some individual RFDs to transport our items because it's easier to do that if they're coming back from a country. Can you pick up this gun? We're not doing that as much anymore because of Brexit and other things, but that's what we used to do. I wouldn't say learning because it's a different framework that they work within, but certainly using them to support some of our needs.

SB: Yeah, so it's more of a dialogue than you're learning from them.

LB: Yeah, I think so. It's more that we know of their existence. They know, for example, if they've got a gun that isn't selling, and they'd quite like to donate it, we're the first port of call because we've got all the licences. We're aware of each other. Ethical learnings, probably not a

lot, but we certainly support each other and make sure that the advocacy around weapons in the media as good as it can be.

SB: Yeah, that makes sense. The other potential source of ethical guidance is the Armouries itself, its past doings. Have there been any episodes where the Armouries has learned from this, maybe not explicitly, but has drawn on its past activities to improve and change things?

LB: I'm sure there's been lots of that. I'm not sure I can pinpoint anything in particular, but I'm sure there'll be lots, as and when things are worked through daily life, I can imagine things are tweaked as necessary. This doesn't relate to weapons, but Katie, Jen, and I were discussing something this morning about insurance valuations and how someone's asked for us to provide the valuation we're getting for the weapon. Of course, they should, but we know as soon as we give a higher price, they'll ask for more money, and we're trying to balance the public purse and all of that. Again, we realised at that point we don't have anything in the guidance about that. I can't pinpoint anything about weapons specifically right now, today, but I'm sure there's been lots over the years. There's been hundreds of years in the making, so I'm sure there must be.

SB: So it's more of an organic process than any big event saying, okay, this is what either we should do or definitely should not do.

LB: Exactly. We all know that things should be reviewed regularly, and they are.

SB: Yeah, that's certainly my impression from reading the various policy and procedure documents. That all adds up. One thing that I'd be interested to hear more about is the relationship between the Armouries' ethical responsibilities with its legal and professional responsibilities. That's something that we've definitely touched upon at times, but can you pinpoint any areas where the Armouries has to implement additional provisions, ethically, above what is required legally and/or professionally?

LB: Yes, probably lots. I'm trying to think of a case where you can talk to it over and above. Again, we've touched on it before, about the access to collections, the development of the collection, what we're required to do and how we manage that. I think we've probably touched on a few cases there. I'm not sure I can think of anything else off the top of my head, where we've gone over and above the law.

SB: Yes, and the professional frameworks, so something like PAS 197 or Accreditation.

LB: Yeah, I mean security sometimes, perhaps. We do occasionally adapt mounts if we feel that particular case or that particular angle with the CCTV. Technically, we've got enough CCTV on it, we've got enough invigilation, it's in this proper display case. But we might think there's an extra layer we can put on over and above. I guess it's about controls, and a risk management process. This is a very general response, if we can come up with any additional controls and can easily put them in place financially through effort and resource, then we would. We'd always try to get to the top level if we can, so that the risk is minimised to the highest level. But I honestly can't think of, other than the scenarios we've already talked about, anything else over and above that right now.

SB: That's really useful. It's having these concrete examples; you think these ideas through and peg them on something. A link question to that is how far do all these frameworks feed into one another, do you think, both at a general level and in relation to the Armouries' operations? The ethical frameworks, professional frameworks and the legal frameworks.

LB: They don't all link together that well. If you look at them from a standalone perspective, there isn't much connection, other than perhaps Accreditation listing the benchmarks all together. It's up to the institutions to link them together for their needs, so what they are responding to, what they know they need to respond to, how that applies, and how that's then embedded in institutional policies and procedures that are specific to them. I don't think the standards, the legislation, there isn't much that pulls it together, even for a weapons collection.

SB: No, that makes sense.

LB: I was going to say I thought about an example, over and above. The ratios, how many people you have when you are with weapons, so a conversation we have regularly about what's appropriate to that scenario. We know legislatively it doesn't outline or prescribe what's required. We know that the standards don't say that, but we know for the safety of any object you need a certain level of comfort around this, and then for weapons over and above. We've outlined what ratios over and above all of those work for us, and how that might change depending on where you are. If you're at the NFC, you might be able to have a slightly higher ratio, or smaller number of staff to higher visitors because of the security of the facility. If you're

in a VIP area and you're at a royal venue or something like that, you know the security's robust, so again, you might adjust it and then we've got the baseline that sits above it. So again, there's that. That's the only one I can think of right now, but I'll keep thinking.

SB: Yeah, that's a really good example. Again, it's that risk management perspective coming through and adjusting. It's a holistic approach rather than you have to meet every single minimum, in every single area.

LB: Yeah, exactly.

SB: That's really useful. Going back to the reciprocal influence of all these frameworks. Do you think it's possible to think of all these issues as separate? Like the legal is separate from the professional, which is separate from the ethical. Or is it very much these are all at play, and they're all feeding into one another in relation to the weapons collections?

LB: They're all at play and they feed in depending on the scenario that you're in, the requirements of that. They're all at play, all the time, because they are something that we need to meet, for various reasons. Legally, absolutely, we have to do that. Accreditation, PAS 197, professional codes of ethics, all of that. If we lose our accreditation, that has huge impacts for us as well. If we do anything daft when it comes to our licences, losing our licences means we can't operate anymore. So it's all at play, all at the same time. But you have to apply it depending on the scenario that you're in, and whatever procedure or whatever you're working on.

SB: How do you go about tracking all of this at once? There's obviously the process of review, but how does this take place in practice, would you say?

LB: Things are reviewed yearly, obviously. But we always say to all staff, at any point if this isn't working, this is too restricted or this wasn't safe enough – I mean there's not an actual framework to work within – that would then go to their manager, which would come up to senior collections team and then it would be embedded, any changes that need to happen. It's done quite informally and organically, I guess as we were discussing before. I don't know if that should change really, because it is dependent on what's happened that day and the amount of things that are thrown at us in terms of different scenarios, you could never really predict.

SB: The next area I'd like to cover is a specific example of all these concerns and issues in practice, and that's the 'At the Sharp End' expedition. What was your involvement in the ethical debates around that? Because it's going beyond the standard issues of working with weapons, it's that extra level of they have been used in crime, or at least they've been seized from a criminal perspective. What were the additional challenges in organising that exhibition?

LB: You'll need to speak to those involved with the exhibition, so Scot [Hurst, then Assistant Curator of Arms and Armour], probably Katie, I guess she'll have been involved, of course, conservation team. But Scot was our curator from our side, he was the lead. From my perspective, the only conversation I was part of was when it was brought to EB's attention that, I think it was the *Guardian* had just published a report, which talks about knife crime and how when the Met Police, for example, were putting pictures of the knives that they were finding on the street, it was trying to reassure the public that they were recovering these knives. But the report suggested, actually, what it was doing was inspiring others to purchase knives because it was scaring them with the amount of knives that were on the street, so it was a Catch 22. There was a conversation about whether the exhibition should be pulled because were we then talking and scaring people into it? We realised that's daft because our collection is our collection. If we can't talk about them, then no one can. We realised at that point it was very much about how we talk about it, rather than whether we do it or we don't do it. So there was that debate based on that report that came out a couple of weeks before the exhibition was due to open, and how that might then be reflected in terms of public perception. But the project, I've forgotten what the project was called now, the police project that's in the exhibition.

SB: Oh right, [Operation] Jemlock.

LB: Yeah, thank you. But that project was very different to the way the Met Police handled knife crime, and so the whole study wasn't reflective of West Yorkshire police's efforts. We talked about it a different way, but we did have to have that ethical conversation about sensitivities around it. Whether we were scaring people with the knives that can be found on the street or whether we were talking about how safe it's been made, and it was very much the latter. Have you seen the exhibition?

SB: Yeah. I've been fortunate to have a look at it and it's really interesting. It's quite different to the Armouries' regular interpretative approach, I'd say.

LB: Do speak to Scott, because he was literally involved in picking those items from the stores, how that all reflected and was right in there. I wasn't on the project team.

SB: Right, have you visited the exhibition and what were your impressions of it?

LB: Yes, I've visited the exhibition. I thought the videos were a little bit scary at times, in terms of what they were up against, knowing that they're about to find a knife on someone, they didn't know what type of knife it was, how it might be wielded. They handled it incredibly well, but for me, as someone who doesn't deal with that sort of thing, I found that quite emotive. I liked that they talked about safety and how much has been taken off the streets and what that project's doing, I found that reassuring. Then the kids' pictures and the competition, I thought that was really nice and how they've interpreted it all, what it means to them and how it could change lives in the future. Yeah, I thought it was a very good display and much more of this social display is what we should be doing about weapons in society today. I mean the self-defence gallery, I don't know if you know this or not, but that was all supposed to be about weapons in society, and we could do a lot more with that with today's news and what's going on, the various projects that are going on and what the NFC are doing. I think we absolutely should be talking to the public about that.

SB: What were your impressions about the case of weapons in the display? Because that was something that really struck me, how that was approached.

LB: I thought how well they were displayed and how people could see them, and how good that was. But that was really my response to the actual weapons, because some of them were quite inventive. But again, I've seen a lot of that stuff before. It was more, for me, watching in action the police take the items off people, that's something that really struck me.

SB: My thing was the interpretation was very interesting because it wasn't like the normal presentation where each individual object would have a label, it would have its object accession number. It was this big mass of weapons that have been seized from the streets and it's a very different way of using the objects. More of the visual impact as a whole really rather than the importance of the individual objects.

LB: Yeah. Did you ever see our impact display in the self-defence gallery before we removed it for 'Make Believe', the pop culture stuff.

SB: I don't think I did, actually.

LB: There's probably project information on that, but that was all about the impact of knife crime and there was actual pictures of individuals who'd gone to prison or had been killed, unfortunately. Then in one of the cases, a registrar's nightmare, was just a pile of guns, about 50 handguns just in this l-shaped case, all piled one on top of another. That was to talk about the impact, and it wasn't labels. As you say, it's a different way of displaying them and a different way of talking to them. I think once you perhaps speak to those involved with this project, you'll understand that a lot was driven by West Yorkshire Police. It was not a co-curation necessarily, actually I would say it was, thinking about it. So it wasn't our practices, necessarily, it wasn't museum practices that led us down that route. Again, I'm sure it's a registrar's nightmare for Katie because you use the labels for audit purposes quite often. Of course, you want to check all of the items, but having another way of identifying them individually is very useful.

SB: Yes, Katie did mention about that and it's very interesting to see how the items are treated compared to the accessioned collections. Leading on, what do you think the Armouries can learn from this exhibition, whether that's related to ideas of ethical access surrounding the collections or just lessons in general?

LB: Working with others, there's a lot of learning there. We've not done much of that before and that's a route we do want to go down, so there's that. There's talking about what's happening in society today, relevance to the public right now, what other projects we could do along these lines and how it's met perhaps some different audience segments' needs. We need to do some research on that, and I think our Marketing & Communications guys are going to look into that. I think as well that community angle with the kids' pictures, there's a lot to be said about that. There's intellectual access that we do a lot of in the museum in terms of the engaged learner. It talks about this as this object, this is the accession number. But what you were just talking about is how someone might get an emotional response from it, instead of just this is this object. How you display things might be adapted depending on audience needs or the subject matter, perhaps. I think it's been interesting to do something that's so topical and relevant, and we'll see what the audience research comes out of it. I don't think it'll fully change the permanent displays angle until we're at master plan stage, but it might be more learning for our temporary exhibitions.

SB: Yeah, that makes sense. It'll be really interesting to see how it feeds into it, and I suppose it's too early to say at this stage really.

LB: I think what we will find is that not many people came round necessarily, or they didn't come specifically for it because it's only a small display. But those that did see it perhaps engaged more, had more of an emotional response than those looking around the permanent exhibitions. We talk about visitor numbers and amount of people who actually come through the doors, but how many people are actually engaging with the collection? Who's taking something home with them, who's learning something, and that's the step we need to get to. I think that exhibition will have done more of that than perhaps some of our other displays.

SB: I suppose that's always the consideration, do you want quantity or quality? Ideally you want both, but that's always an interesting one. This leads on to my last area of questions. Are the needs of the Armouries suitably accounted by the existing expressions of ethical practice, or are there ways that you think that this could be improved going forward? Are the existing expressions of ethical practice, so museum codes of ethics, other case studies, and the values and principles it holds, are they appropriate to the challenges of managing weapons collections?

LB: I think we've spoken about this before and it's a yes and no. They're not inappropriate, but they're not as useful as we would need them to be, and that's why we need our extra layers as other specialist collections do. I think they're absolutely appropriate in a general sense for all museums. But every institution has to work out how they apply them, and what they need over and above them to function basically.

SB: That makes sense. Are there any ways that this could be improved for the Armouries, or for the sector in general? With relation to weapons collections.

LB: I think just what we've already talked about in the Subject Specialist Network type idea really, so that there's a base for people to get guidance, to get contact information, to look up legislation or to talk to someone else in the same scenario. It's having a network that can provide that support rather than something coming out generally from one of the bigger institutions. I think it's got to be subject specific, but there's more that we can do on that.

SB: I know that in past conversations, the idea of subject specific guidance has been raised. Do you think ethical considerations have a part to play in that and whether they should be covered in

that? Or do you think that's something that should be more open and discussed, and not set down in text?

LB: I think probably the latter. I can see a scenario where case studies are used to provide learning and guidance, but in a way that you would apply it to your own scenario based on the case. Just to give people a sense of security and idea around how it might work out. I'm not sure I would want to be too prescribed about it, I'm not sure you can be. I'd love to see what that might look like and then have this discussion. Like what the ethics would be, and then we could talk about it. But I think it would end up being so general, it wouldn't be useful beyond what we've already got.

SB: Yeah, the approach that some texts on ethics use is, as you said, the idea of the case study and then posing questions. That's one way of maybe doing it.

LB: I think so. I can imagine a code of ethics. You could easily have a code of ethics for weapons collections, but would it be useful? Perhaps not.

SB: I think that's all my questions that I've got. But are there any last things that you'd like to add before I end the recording?

LB: I don't think so. Not today, but thank you.

SB: No problem. In that case, I shall end the recording.