Working Class in BS13 and BS4: A Community-Led Report (2026)

Understanding identity, lived experience, and class mobility in South Bristol

1. Introduction

This report presents findings from community-led research exploring the question: **"What does it mean to be working class in BS13 and BS4?"**

The research was carried out across South Bristol and grounded entirely in **lived experience**, not academic definitions. It draws on:

- **46 survey responses**
- **4 focus groups (23 participants)**

The purpose of the research was to:

- Understand how residents define "working class"
- Explore how class identity has changed over time
- Examine how class relates to wealth, education, housing, and opportunity
- Capture cultural values, pride, and challenges associated with being working class

The findings reveal a community that is **proud, exhausted, resilient, and constrained**, navigating class not only as an economic reality but as a cultural, emotional, and generational identity.

2. Methodology

The research consisted of:

Survey Responses (46 total)

Participants answered open-ended questions about:

- Definitions of working class
- Job types associated with class
- Upbringing, culture, and community
- Class mobility
- Everyday challenges
- Media representation
- Politics and society

Focus Groups (4 groups, 23 participants)

Focus groups explored:

- Emotional meaning of class
- Cultural markers

- Barriers to opportunity
- Experiences of stigma
- Perceptions of mobility
- Community identity

Participant Profile

Participants ranged widely in age, background, and employment status. Common characteristics included:

- Strong ties to BS13/BS4 neighbourhoods
- Experience of financial precarity
- Reliance on wages rather than wealth
- Deep connection to council estate identity

3. What Does "Working Class" Mean?

Across BS13 and BS4, residents overwhelmingly described working class identity as a **lived condition**, shaped by:

- **Working for a living**
- **Low or unstable wages**
- **Living paycheck to paycheck**
- **Having no financial safety net**
- **Being undervalued or looked down on**

Key themes included:

- "Living within your means and not living a life of luxury."
- "Knowledge that I live from one pay check to another."
- "A feeling of being unseen as a working person: the idea of being 'working poor'."
- "Strong work ethic, reliability, resilience."

Residents also linked class strongly to **place**, especially council estates, postcode identity, and local culture.

4. Self-Identification as Working Class

Most participants identified themselves as working class.

Reasons included:

- Growing up on council estates
- Attending local state schools
- Parents and grandparents being working class
- Working low-paid or physically demanding jobs
- Reliance on wages to survive
- Feeling judged by postcode, accent, or background

Some participants expressed **ambivalence**:

- “Unsure — my education and profession have pulled me into a more central alignment.”
- “I am financially working class but my social groups are middle class.”
- “I wouldn’t say it out loud as it’s embarrassing.”

Others expressed **pride**:

- “Always have and always will consider myself working class.”
- “Working class people keep the country going.”

5. Has the Meaning Changed Over Time?

Residents described significant changes in how working class identity is understood today.

Key shifts include:

- Increased **financial instability**, even for those in full-time work
- Erosion of traditional working class jobs
- Greater **postcode stigma**
- Rising cost of living making people feel “working poor”
- More people working multiple jobs
- Changing cultural expectations and pressures

Some felt class identity is **harder to escape** now due to:

- housing costs
- childcare costs
- transport barriers
- limited progression opportunities

Others felt class identity is **less visible** but **more emotionally charged**.

6. Wealth, Education, and Class

Can a high earner be working class?

Most residents said **yes**, if:

- they grew up working class
- they still rely on wages
- they still feel culturally connected to working class identity

However, many emphasised that **wealth changes lifestyle, choices, and security**, making class mobility possible — but fragile.

Can someone with a degree be working class?

Most said **yes**, especially if:

- the degree did not lead to a high-paid job
- the person still lives paycheck to paycheck
- their upbringing was working class

Does private education change class?

Most felt private schooling would **distance someone from working class identity**, but upbringing still mattered.

7. Is Everyone in BS13 and BS4 Working Class?

Most participants said **the majority** of residents are working class, but emphasised:

- increasing diversity
- pockets of relative affluence
- differences between estates and newer developments
- variations in job type, income, and education

Residents strongly resisted the idea that BS13/BS4 is a **single class group**, instead describing a **spectrum of working class experiences**.

8. Working Class Culture

Residents described working class culture as:

- strong family focus
- loyalty and solidarity
- knowing your neighbours
- pub culture, skittles, bingo
- regional accents
- practical, hands-on jobs
- “doing things for yourself”
- pride in graft and resilience

They also highlighted:

- stigma attached to council estates
- limited opportunities
- stress and exhaustion
- feeling judged by accent or postcode
- being “boxed in” by where you live

Despite challenges, many expressed **deep pride** in their identity and community.

9. Scored Statements: Levels of Agreement

Focus group participants scored statements reflecting working class experiences.

Highest-agreement themes:

- **Living close to the edge financially**
- **Working because you have to, with no safety net**
- **Being essential but unnoticed**
- **Being misrepresented as lazy or careless**
- **Being born into a position you must negotiate your whole life**
- **Pride in graft, skills, and looking after your own**

These scores show a community that feels **hardworking but undervalued**, **resilient but constrained**, and **proud but often stereotyped**.

10. Key Conclusions

- Working class identity in BS13 and BS4 is **rooted in lived experience**, not income alone.
- It is shaped by **place, upbringing, insecurity, and cultural belonging**.
- Residents feel **essential to society** but **undervalued by institutions**.
- Class is widely understood as something you are **born into and must navigate**, not simply earn or escape.
- Pride, solidarity, and resilience sit alongside **stress, stigma, and exclusion**.
- Structural barriers — housing, transport, education, childcare — limit mobility.