

Empire, Slavery and Scotland's Museums

1. The Committee agreed to undertake a short piece of work to consider the progress made in relation to the [Empire, Slavery & Scotland's Museums project](#). The project was sponsored by the Scottish Government and managed by Museums Galleries Scotland. The project's independent steering group made a series of [recommendations](#) in June 2022 on how Scotland's involvement in empire, colonialism, and historic slavery can be addressed using museum collections and museum spaces.
2. The Scottish Government responded to the recommendations in [January 2024](#), accepting all recommendations. The response noted that it is "not currently in a position to provide the levels of financial support which the recommendations request", but that it would "use the resources we do have available to transparently build an effective, resilient organisation which contains the necessary skills to identify and acquire additional funding streams to allow this crucial work to progress and develop over coming years." The Scottish Government has asked the current steering group to "work with Museums Galleries Scotland who will facilitate a collaborative piece of work examining how [the new] organisation can be formed and begin its work."
3. In addition, the Scottish Government noted in response to several of the recommendations that it "has provided funding towards the development of the Museums Galleries Scotland project '[Delivering Change](#)'" and "will commit to continuing to provide funding for the remainder of the project" which will run until 2027. The project will "support the museum sector to develop more equitable and inclusive practice across under-represented communities".
4. The research and recommendations are also reflected in [Scotland's Museums and Galleries Strategy for 2023-2030](#), developed by Museums Galleries Scotland and supported by the Scottish Government.
5. Today's evidence session provides the Committee with an opportunity to consider—
 - Views on the Scottish Government response
 - Actions taken by the museums sector thus far to embed the recommendations
 - Next steps, including work to scope a new organisation

CEEAC/S6/24/26/1

- Progress on the Delivering Change project
- Potential barriers to progress

6. At this meeting, the Committee will take evidence from—

- Lucy Casot, Chief Executive, Museums Galleries Scotland
- Sheila Asante, Delivering Change Programme Manager, Museums Galleries Scotland
- Zandra Yeaman, Member, Empire, Slavery and Scotland's Museums Steering Group
- Elena Trimarchi, Member, Empire, Slavery and Scotland's Museums Steering Group

7. The following papers are attached—

- Annexe A: SPICe briefing
- Annexe B: Joint written submission from Museums Galleries Scotland and the Empire, Slavery and Scotland's Museums Steering Group

**Clerks to the Committee
November 2024**

Annexe A: SPICe briefing

SPICe

The Information Centre
An t-Ionad Fiosrachaidh

Empire, Slavery, & Scotland's Museums

Establishment

In 2021 the [Empire, Slavery & Scotland's Museums: Addressing our Colonial Legacy](#) review was established following a [debate](#) and [motion in the Scottish Parliament](#) on 10 June 2020. The 2020 debate was in the context of the death of George Floyd and the responses to this in the USA and UK. Within a longer motion, Parliament agreed that it:

“... believes that there is a responsibility on us all to identify and dismantle barriers of structural racism that exist in our society and institutions; agrees that it is up to all in society to tackle racism and advance race equality; agrees that Scotland should establish a slavery museum to address our historic links to the slave trade; regrets the fact that so many monuments and street names still celebrate the perpetrators and profiteers of slavery; calls on all levels of government to work to address this toxic legacy ...”

The [2020-21 Programme for Government](#) committed to:

“Sponsor an independent expert group to recommend how Scotland's existing and future museum collections can better recognise and represent a more accurate portrayal of Scotland's colonial and slavery history.”

Subsequently [Museums Galleries Scotland \(MGS\)](#) set up a steering group which was independently chaired by Professor Sir Geoff Palmer. The purpose of the steering groups was to “make concrete and sustainable recommendations to Scottish Government on how Scottish museums and galleries can better address the legacies of slavery, empire, and colonialism at every level.”

The steering group highlighted a number of questions which were to inform its remit. These were:

- What does racial equity look like?
- How do museums listen to the demands that have been made: to ensure the work museums do goes beyond the statements made in reaction to the BLM movement in 2020? What does that look like?

- How do museums include people in the conversation as to how action and change can happen?
- What is the role of museums in making the connection between the racism of yesterday and the racism of today?
- How can museums make anti-racism part of their core organisational values?
- How do museums educate ALL of their audiences to recognise and acknowledge the imbedded colonial structures?

The work of the steering group had six “key subject areas”. These were:

- Research
- Collections
- Interpretation
- Human Resource
- Education/Learning
- Proposal for the establishment of a museum of empire and slavery

Consultation

The steering group undertook a national consultation along with [Intercultural Youth Scotland](#) and Diffley Partnership to:

“establish public and expert perspectives for how Scotland’s involvement in empire, colonialism, and historic slavery can be addressed using museum collections and museum spaces”.

This consultation had a number of strands and the steering group also considered outputs from a range of other research projects. Some of these are considered in a later section of this paper in the context of how to take forward the recommendations of the report.

The Diffley Partnership was appointed to undertake the public consultation. Intercultural Youth Scotland (IYS) was appointed to undertake the focus group consultation with Priority Communities¹. In total nearly 5,000 people took part the consultation.

The public consultation had three strands, the largest (c3,200 responses) was through an existing online research panel, ScotPulse. The research notes that using this route “mitigate potential self-selection bias”. The other two routes were online surveys, one promoted through YoungScot (c300 responses) and the other a

¹ ‘Priority Communities’ here refers to ‘people from communities who have been negatively impacted by the structural forms of discrimination and racism that can be connected to the legacies of empire, colonialism, and historic slavery.’

“general survey” promoted publicly (c1,000 responses). The researchers noted that the general survey “is not nationally representative and caution must be taken when comparing this survey to the findings from the ScotPulse survey which is nationally representative”.

The public surveys were undertaken between September and November 2021. They sought views on:

- A dedicated space to address Scotland’s role in empire, colonialism and historic slavery;
- the museums sector addressing Scotland’s histories of empire, colonialism and historic slavery;
- general information about views and experiences towards museums in Scotland;
- cultural rights; and
- views on empire, slavery, and colonialism more widely.

In terms of a dedicated space, the surveys found that “over two thirds of Scots agree they would visit this space to learn more and would like to have access to this space in their local area”. There was also interest in online provision.

In relation to the sector addressing these issues, there was a “clear majority support” for the sector to undertake work to address Scotland’s histories of empire, colonialism and historic slavery, for example by collaborating with schools. The suggestion of returning “looted and stolen objects divided opinion”.

The surveys found that “people largely feel welcome in Scotland’s museums” and that there is a “broad consensus that everyone in Scotland should be able to participate in cultural life and heritage.”

In terms of wider views on empire, slavery, and colonialism, the research found:

“Over two thirds of people interested in how Scotland was involved in the British Empire (72%), in historic slavery (68%), and in colonialism (66%) ... younger people (16-24) have more intense levels of interest than older age groups, with larger proportions selecting ‘very interested’ for the topics.”

The key findings from the IYS research with focus groups were:

- Black People and People of Colour in Scotland want museums and galleries to undertake a thorough program of decolonisation and anti-racist training before any new museums are commissioned;
- Support for a museum of empire and enslavement among Black People and People of Colour in Scotland is split;
- Many are concerned that such a space could halt decolonisation in existing spaces

- Many are concerned that the proposal is tokenistic and will not materially change the experience of Black People and People of Colour in Scotland; and
- The relationship between Black People and People of Colour in Scotland and museums and galleries lacks trust and consultation.

The consultation demonstrated support for a programme to decolonise the work of museums, there were nevertheless a range of views expressed. How the final report reflected a variety of views may be an area the Committee could explore.

The Report and the Government's Response

The [Empire, Slavery, & Scotland's Museums project's report and recommendations](#) were published in June 2022. Professor Sir Geoff Palmer's foreword to the report of the Empire, Slavery & Scotland's Museums Steering Group said—

“A fundamental issue was highlighted by consultation undertaken with Black and minority ethnic people. This stressed that, for many Black and minority ethnic people, not only are museums part of the cultural landscape of racism, but that, in their current state, they are contributing to the problem. This has eroded the relationship between Black and minority ethnic communities in Scotland and our museums and galleries, leading to a lack of trust. Mistrust is a serious societal issue and there are ways that institutions can address this. Transparency, a willingness to admit to and learn from mistakes, and a commitment to working together can support the development of these relationships over time. The recommendations in this report offer a chance to develop understanding through education and to build trust, which will lead to meaningful progress. It is vital to earn this trust if museums and galleries are to truly serve all of Scotland's communities and people.”

The recommendations of the group were—

1. Scotland should create a dedicated space to address our role in empire, colonialism, and historic slavery. A new organisation should be created to lead this work.
2. Museums should ensure anti-racism is embedded in their workplaces and public spaces.
3. Museums should involve the people of Scotland in shaping their work through co-production, to promote cultural democracy and participation for all.
4. Museums should commit to research, interpret, and share the histories of Scotland's links to empire, colonialism, and historic slavery.
5. Museums should support efforts to promote and embed race equality and anti-racism in the curricula in a meaningful, effective, and sustainable way.
6. Scottish Government should demonstrate their support for restitution and repatriation of looted or unethically acquired items in Scottish collections.

In January 2024, the [Scottish Government said that it fully accepted](#) all six of the recommendations made by the review. The then Minister for Culture, Europe and International Development Christina McKelvie said:

“I warmly welcome the steering group’s report and recommendations, which we have considered very carefully. Following in-depth discussion with the steering group, I am pleased to confirm the Scottish Government fully accepts all six recommendations, including the creation of a dedicated space to address Scotland’s role in empire, colonialism and historic slavery.”

The Government was not able to commit to the additional funding the report foresaw. The Government said—

“The financial position of the Culture sector, following the Covid-19 pandemic, and as part of the wider cost-of-living crisis is challenging and as a result the Scottish Government is not currently in a position to provide the levels of financial support which the recommendations request. However, we will use the resources we do have available to transparently build an effective, resilient organisation which contains the necessary skills to identify and acquire additional funding streams to allow this crucial work to progress and develop over coming years.”

While the report had only six recommendations, these were accompanied by more specific asks of the Scottish Government, the sector, the new body envisaged in recommendation 1, and MGS to support the delivery of the recommendations. The Committee may find this useful in considering how the recommendations are being progressed. The report also set out a rationale for each of the recommendations. The following sections highlights some of this additional information under each of the recommendations. It also notes the Government’s response under each recommendation.

Two of the recommendations reference the need to take an anti-racists stance. The report used the following definition for anti-racism—

“Anti-racism is a commitment to actively change the policies, behaviours, and beliefs that spread racist ideas and actions. Anti-racism is based in action and is about taking steps to remove racism at the individual, institutional, and structural levels.”

MGS’ role within the recommendations tends to be around supporting and leading the sector through the envisaged changes. The new organisation is also envisaged to have a co-ordinating and supporting role.

MGS held an even in Parliament on 8th October 2024. The Cabinet Secretary spoke at that event and the Government has since [published the transcript of his speech under Fol](#). The Cabinet Secretary said—

“[The steering group’s consultation] really emphasised to the sector that the vast majority of Scottish society wants to see all deeply embedded racism, including that in our museums and galleries, tackled at the root, and eradicated. This underlines why the Scottish Government was proud to accept

all the recommendations. This work remains essential in all of our cultural places. Scotland's museums and galleries should be safe spaces that represent all our communities, and should reflect our nation's past."

Scotland should create a dedicated space to address our role in empire, colonialism, and historic slavery. A new organisation should be created to lead this work.

The project estimated that the new organisation envisaged in recommendation 1 would cost £5m over the initial four years to set up and would then require ongoing support. The report said that the new organisation should be led "by people with relevant lived experience of racism and colonial legacies and professional expertise". It also said that the exact form of the new organisation would need to be considered and developed—

"This organisation would creatively explore themes and test approaches, including networked, temporary, and digital methods to determine the permanent form of the Museum. ...

"There is no existing provision for a space dedicated to addressing Scotland's role in empire, colonialism, and historic slavery. Evidence supports a focus on local areas and local stories, and close collaboration with existing museums both to tell these stories and to change their approaches. Evidence supports the use of digital and temporary solutions to build trust and explore approaches during the initial development phase."

Scottish Government's response

The Government agreed with the recommendation but said that "before a new organisation can be created some scoping work is required to establish the staffing needs, operational costs, remit and responsibilities of any new organisation."

The Government said that it is, "not currently able to commit to £5 million over four years for this work, however it will commit to scoping out the format, objectives, and costings of a new organisation which will then seek out avenues for diversification of income sourcing." It continued—

"The Scottish Government has provided funding in 2023/24 to allow this work to begin. We have asked the current Empire, Slavery and Scotland's Museums steering group to work with Museums Galleries Scotland who will facilitate a collaborative piece of work examining how this organisation can be formed and begin its work. Partnership working should be employed to run an open recruitment process to allow the transparent appointment of a suitably inclusive mix of skills, knowledge and lived experience to fill any skills gaps on the steering group so that the group can take forward this scoping work without any unnecessary delays."

MGS' submission said that to date £200,000 has been allocated on this work.

Museums should ensure anti-racism is embedded in their workplaces and public spaces.

The report elaborated on this recommendation—

“Everyone in Scotland should have access to, and feel safe in, Scotland’s museums. Consultation undertaken with people who experience racism has found that the ways museums operate have been perpetuating inherently racist approaches and causing trauma. These racist narratives negatively impact all people in Scotland. Museums should be supported to ensure anti-racism is embedded in their workplaces and public spaces, working to understand how oppression and power intersect with discrimination of all types, to create environments where they support, nurture, and value all forms of knowledge and expertise equally.

“The Scottish museums sector is currently not representative of the diversity of people living in Scotland. To enable all people to have opportunities to influence and contribute to the work of museums, these organisations will need to be supported to understand how their systems have perpetuated racism, and to develop effective measures to diversify the workforce, from entry routes to leadership positions. This should focus on those who have been marginalised.”

The report highlighted to the Scottish Government that the sector would require resources to support change. It said that this “will include support for the development of awareness, and longer-term funding to implement and embed anti-racism across the sector; this support may be channelled through MGS or other intermediary bodies”.

The report said that museums across Scotland should “research and understand their institutional histories, including how these interact with the histories and contemporary legacies of empire, colonialism, and historic slavery, and share these with the public.” Museums were also called upon to diversify their workforces. MGS was also called upon to lead this work. This included ensuring that MGS embeds anti-racism in its work and diversifies its staff, as well as leading and supporting the sector.

Scottish Government’s response

The Government said that this recommendation reflects the [inclusive Vision for culture in Scotland articulated in the Culture Strategy](#). The Government said that much of this would be for individual museums and MGS to take forward and “will require a significant culture change across our organisations”. The Government said—

“To support this important work, the Scottish Government has provided funding towards the development of the Museums Galleries Scotland project ‘Delivering Change’. The project will support the museum sector to develop more equitable and Inclusive practice across under-represented communities including all protected characteristics. The delivery phase of Delivering

Change began in September 2023 and will run for four years. The Scottish Government will commit to continuing to provide funding for the remainder of the project.”

Museums should involve the people of Scotland in shaping their work through co-production, to promote cultural democracy and participation for all.

The report expands on this recommendation by referencing the right to participate freely in the cultural life of the community. It continued—

“People in Scotland should have the opportunity to be part of setting the narrative for future work, at all stages—from development and planning to evaluation and delivery. People from communities that experience racism should be instrumental in determining how museums address the legacies of empire, colonialism, and historic slavery. The work of museums with communities should include those worldwide who are still experiencing the impact of Scotland’s role in empire, colonialism, and historic slavery.

“To enable this change, museums should be encouraged to embed accountability within their work (and the work of their partners), and to address issues around gatekeeping, power, and control, so that they can build trust with all of their audiences, including those who experience racism.”

The report said that the “museum workforce recognises that overall, museums are not effective at working in partnership with people who experience racism” and that “visitor profiles are not representative of Scotland’s people”.

The report called on the Scottish Government to “recognise that short-term and project-based approaches have contributed to superficial, often tokenistic, and even exploitative activity, that does not create sustainable relationships or sustained, transformative change; the Scottish Government should work with MGS and other funders to develop solutions for this to benefit collaboration across the sector.”

Museums were asked to “reframe their priorities to be people-centred, rather than collections- or organisation-centred, making community engagement core to their work.” MGS was tasked with working with “relevant experts and partners to develop and deliver guidance and training on how museums can work in an inclusive/participatory way”.

Scottish Government’s response

The Government accepted the criticism of previous approaches to addressing racial inequality and other associated impacts of the legacy of colonialism. It said that “it is important that our national museums, and our smaller organisations ensure there is increased partnership working, promoting better representation of marginalised communities and providing greater inclusivity for all.”

The Government said that the Delivering Change project would support this recommendation.

Museums should commit to research, interpret, and share the histories of Scotland's links to empire, colonialism, and historic slavery.

The report said—

“Consultation has indicated that a strong majority of the respondents to the public survey would like museums to include more extensive and nuanced accounts of empire, colonialism, and historic slavery, with openness and transparency about areas of debate and gaps in historical knowledge. Currently, a minority of museums across Scotland share these histories or explore the legacies of these themes in contemporary Scotland.

“Consultation with people who experience racism has indicated that openness to who has the interpretive authority/voice is key to changing the way museums communicate. The sector has indicated that, overall, they feel that they lack the information, expertise, and skills needed to undertake this work, and that they require support to do this.”

Specifically in relation to the Scottish Government, the report said it should consider, recognising and “communicating their understanding of, and publicly accepting, Scotland’s role within empire, colonialism, and historic slavery at a national and international level.”

The report called on museums to “value all forms of expertise, including that which comes from lived experience, and seek to integrate this into their research, interpretation, and programming.” It also called on museums to “recognise and seek to remove racism from their interpretation, including where this is passively manifested through single perspective narratives centred on those in positions of power.” The report saw MGS’ role to support the sector and to provide “opportunities for museums to share good practice, to learn from approaches from within Scotland, the UK, and internationally, and to test approaches to this work.”

Scottish Government’s response

The Government’s response said—

“Articulation of a more accurate account of the implications of our history for our collections is a crucial way we can reduce the harms caused by inaccurate interpretations, allowing us to better understand a more accurate view of our past and best inform our future.”

The Government said that this work will be a significant task for the sector and will take time. The Government sees this work being taken forward by MGS and the Delivering Change project.

Museums should support efforts to promote and embed race equality and anti-racism in the curricula in a meaningful, effective, and sustainable way.

The report said—

“Schools and learning practitioners should embed an understanding of how these legacies have shaped present-day racism across all educational establishments in Scotland. Schools, universities, and higher education establishments should provide learners at all levels with a range of opportunities to explore these histories and the ways they impact daily life in Scotland. Museums should work closely with learning practitioners to share these histories, and to promote and embed race equality and anti-racism in learning environments in meaningful, effective, and sustainable ways.”

The recommended actions for the Scottish Government and the sector focused on collaboration between the education and the museums sector, both at the institutional and policy levels.

Scottish Government’s response

The Scottish Government highlighted the [Anti-Racism in Education Programme](#) “which identifies the important role of the education curriculum in promoting race equality and embedding anti-racism across learning and teaching.” It also noted that—

“Relationships led by Education Scotland are already established with Museums Galleries Scotland regarding the role of museums in underpinning learning and teaching in the curriculum, specifically in history and modern studies. A programme of conversations has been established over the last two years to link school and museum staff together and planning for the next year of this project is underway and will provide an opportunity to highlight work across this area.”

The Scottish Government said that it would, along with Education Scotland, consider “the further development of relationship building between international organisations and schools and education agencies in Scotland, to advance this work.”

Scottish Government should demonstrate their support for restitution and repatriation of looted or unethically acquired items in Scottish collections.

The report said—

“Consultation with those who experience racism within Scotland strongly indicates that restitution and repatriation of unethically acquired museum collections is an essential step in addressing the legacies of empire, colonialism, and historic slavery. Public consultation shows majority support

for the return of looted and stolen objects. The museum sector workforce supports the return of looted or stolen objects. Scottish guidance and engagement activities on restitution and repatriation are needed to clarify the national approach for a public and professional audience, and to encourage the development of dialogue in this area.”

In relation to the actions of the Scottish Government the report said—

- The Scottish Government should seek to identify any barriers to repatriation and restitution for museums and heritage organisations and remove those within its control.
- The Scottish Government should establish dedicated funding to support those who request restitution or repatriation.
- The Scottish Government should work with experts in museums ethics and in racial trauma to develop national guidance for museums, galleries, and heritage organisations on repatriation and restitution.

It also called on individual organisations to “research to understand the provenance of their collections”. This should be reflected in how items on display are described and “museums should seek to return unethically acquired items within their collections.”

Scottish Government’s response

The Scottish Government said—

“We recognise the necessity to consider the ethics of the original method of acquisition of objects in our collections, especially where there are contested accounts of that acquisition. Where objects are proven to have been acquired unethically we strongly encourage that museums consider repatriation/rematriation of these objects.”

It noted that there are complexities around this issue, for example that “some of the levers around repatriation of objects are reserved to UK Government”. The Government said it would explore “barriers to repatriation that are within its control” and seek to remove these. The Government also said—

“Given the current challenging public finance context, it is not currently possible to establish a dedicated funding stream to support repatriation.”

Progress

Professor Sir Geoff Palmer’s foreword to the report of the Empire, Slavery & Scotland’s Museums Steering Group said—

“While the priority for this project has been to amplify the voices and views of those who experience racism, the implementation of these recommendations will help to improve the ways in which Scotland’s museums and galleries interact with all their audiences.”

MGS' submission replicates some of the information in this paper and sets out some of the programmes it is undertaking to progress the recommendations. Members may wish to explore with the panel how these recommendations are being taken forward, what this means for individual museums and visitors, and how progress will be measured.

As the Government response noted, Museums Galleries Scotland is currently conducting a programme called [Delivering Change](#) which is a collective effort between MGS and partnering museums, galleries, and community groups to restructure as organisations based on anti-oppressive principles. It's funded by The National Lottery Heritage Fund, the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation, and the Scottish Government. MGS states:

Scotland's museums continue to be unrepresentative of Scottish society or unequal in terms of:

- The people who make use of them for cultural activities
- The collections they preserve in relation to contemporary society
- The narratives that they tell are often monocultural and do not represent the diversity of lived experiences and histories
- The people who work there

Delivering Change seeks to support museums and communities to improve access to culture through:

- Anti-oppression work for MGS, museums & community groups
- Building relationships based on solidarity with systemically excluded communities
- Re-structuring as organisations based on anti-oppressive principles

To these ends, Delivering Change has three programmes:

- [Museum Activists](#) which is a free [anti-oppression](#) programme for “staff and volunteers in museums, training and support to help all people to access culture.”
- [Museum Transformers](#) which similar to the Museum Activists programme is an “anti-oppression programme that aims to empower the museum workforce to make changes to help all people to access culture”. The focus of this programme is at the level of the organisation, rather than the individual. This programme is closed to new entrants
- [Community Catalysts](#); this will support 8 community groups to connect with one of the organisations participating in the Museum Transformers project. The community group will work with the museum to develop a project idea. There is funding of £2,000 for the development of the project idea and then up to £25,000 to take forward the project.

In his speech at the Parliamentary reception in October, the [Cabinet Secretary](#) [said](#)—

“It is by collectively challenging privilege that we will enact change. Constructive challenge is incredibly valuable as we seek to understand how we can implement effective change going forward.”

In July this year, [MGS set up a working group on repatriation](#). This working group is “thinking about an online resource to highlight the key factors to be considered, including case studies and links to existing guidance, rather than writing a detailed and comprehensive document to cover all eventualities.” The working group is seeking views from the sector on how to take this forward. [MGS has set up a webpage](#) with links to resources for museums.

The Delivering Change programme has ongoing evaluation by a consultancy firm, [Ikake Rising](#).

The recommendations of the Empire, Slavery & Scotland’s Museums: Addressing our Colonial Legacy review are also being taken forward in [Scotland’s Museums and Galleries Strategy 2023 – 2030](#).

As noted above, the steering group’s work drew on several strands of consultation and research and this is set out and summarised in a [guide to the consultation published in 2022](#). Some of the findings of the various strands of the consultation may be relevant in relation to the implementation of the recommendations and highlighting the challenges and complex nature of supporting change in the sector. (Quotes in the following paragraphs are from the 2022 guide to the consultations, not the original research.)

A 2021 survey of museums on how museums were “addressing and exploring chattel slavery through their collections and programming” found that, “many organisations pointed to a lack of resources to tackle the whole issue of the legacy of chattel slavery in Scotland’s museums”. The survey also “revealed a degree of hesitation about how museum staff and volunteers should go about this reinterpretation.”

A follow-up survey in 2022 found that “museums in Scotland do not have sufficient understanding of how their collections relate to empire and colonialism, and this is reflected in their approaches to collections management.” This also found that “responses about restitution and repatriation were mixed”. There were more negative responses in the 2022 survey of museums than in the 2021 survey and “a small number of respondents expressed frustration with a perceived pressure on museums to interpret all links with empire and colonialism in a negative way”.

Glasgow Museums undertook and commissioned research in 2020-21 on how “its audiences and communities wanted it to address the topics of the British Empire and Transatlantic Slavery”. This found, “a widespread recognition that slavery and empire were, to varying degrees, forces of violence, exploitation and oppression, as well as broad support for museums carrying out work to address the resulting legacies.” There was also a suggestion that space could be made for “a range of people to share their perspectives”.

Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion in Scottish Heritage was an Arts and Humanities Research Council project which ran between February 2021 and April 2022 and was led by academics from the University of Strathclyde and the University of Stirling. This identified a desire “to diversify representations of what is considered ‘Scottish’ to include stories of the diverse cultures and heritage of people in Scotland.” It also said that “a recurring discussion point in the Priority Community focus groups was the need to make museum and heritage spaces more accessible and able to support the diverse needs of different cultures and religions.” It also noted that, “not all racialised minorities will want to be involved in the discussion around EDI and anti-racism work, and this needs to be respected.”

Museums Galleries Scotland staff undertook workshops with the museum workforce in 2021. The report of these consultations, said that “the museum workforce is looking for support and leadership” both within the individual organisations and nationally. The focus groups noted that “the staff and visitor profile of Scotland’s museums is not representative of Scotland’s people.”

Ned Sharratt, Senior Researcher, SPICe
22 November 2024

Note: Committee briefing papers are provided by SPICe for the use of Scottish Parliament committees and clerking staff. They provide focused information or respond to specific questions or areas of interest to committees and are not intended to offer comprehensive coverage of a subject area.

The Scottish Parliament, Edinburgh, EH99 1SP www.parliament.scot

Annexe B: Written submission from Museums Galleries Scotland and the Empire, Slavery and Scotland's Museums Steering Group

Opening comments

Following the unanimously supported motion in the Scottish Parliament in June 2020 which agreed that the Scottish Government would work to create a national museum to highlight Scotland's role in the slave trade and colonialism, Museums Galleries Scotland (MGS), the national development body for the sector, was commissioned to facilitate the ESSM project.

This project, sponsored by the Scottish Government, developed six recommendations from the Empire, Slavery & Scotland's Museums independent Steering Group for how Scotland's involvement in empire, colonialism, and historic slavery can be addressed using museum collections and museum spaces.

It is important to acknowledge that the ESSM work built on decades of activism work by organisations within the equalities sector.

The Scottish Government accepted these recommendations in January 2024 and work to deliver them is underway.

Public consultation and research

The ESSM recommendations were developed through a national consultation of workshops, focus groups, and the biggest public survey of attitudes to museums and racism conducted in Scotland. Published in January 2022, [the research showed](#):

Most people agreed that 'Everyone in Scotland should be able to participate in cultural life and heritage' (95%)

81% saw three statements as important:

- Museums should include an accurate account of Scotland's links to empire, colonialism and historic slavery
- Museums should be clear where they have gaps in knowledge and experience
- Museums should collaborate with schools to promote learning about the legacies of empire, colonialism and historic slavery

Further evidence includes [The Legacy Report by Intercultural Youth Scotland and youth researchers](#) directly highlighting the perspectives of Black people and People of Colour in Scotland. A fundamental issue highlighted through this research was that not only are museums part of the cultural landscape of racism, but that, in their current state, they are contributing to the problem, leading to a lack of trust. The ESSM project and recommendations offer a chance to develop understanding through education and to build trust.

The [full set of consultation research](#) is available to read.

The recommendations

In developing the recommendations, the Steering Group looked broadly at potential mechanisms for addressing the legacies of empire, colonialism, and historic slavery in museum spaces and through collections. Each recommendation highlights actions for Scottish Government, for the museum sector and for MGS as the national development body.

The six recommendations are:

Recommendation 1: Scotland should create a dedicated space to address our role in empire, colonialism, and historic slavery. A new organisation should be created to lead this work.

Recommendation 2: Museums should ensure anti-racism is embedded in workplaces and public spaces.

Recommendation 3: Museums should involve the people of Scotland in shaping their work through co-production, to promote cultural democracy and participation for all.

Recommendation 4: Museums should commit to research, interpret, and share the histories of Scotland's links to empire, colonialism, and historic slavery.

Recommendation 5: Museums should support efforts to promote and embed race equality and anti-racism in the curricula in a meaningful, effective, and sustainable way

Recommendation 6: Scottish Government should demonstrate their support for restitution and repatriation of looted or unethically acquired items in Scottish collections.

Ongoing work of the Steering Group

Following the Scottish Government's acceptance of the recommendations, the steering group continues to meet as a transitional board, working to establish the new organisation proposed in recommendation one. The current group membership is Jatin Haria, Abeer Eladany, Parveen Ishaq, Churnjeet Mahn, Steph Scholten, Elena Trimarchi and Zandra Yeaman.

The Group have agreed a Vision Statement for the organisation - "A Scotland committed to anti-racism that explores and addresses the legacies of Empire, Slavery, Colonialisation and Migration. Through connecting people to our shared histories, we have a platform from which to imagine, name and resource a more equitable and collectively owned future."

Looking to establish an organisation that is essentially anti-racist and decolonial, led by People of Colour, and looking to establish practices that move away from defunct traditional models, and under a working title of the "Scottish Museum of Empire, Slavery, Colonialism and Migration" they are applying to be registered as a Scottish Charitable Incorporated Organisation. Recruitment of additional trustees will commence as soon as their charitable status is confirmed.

Progress has not been as fast as hoped for, largely because the group all have busy day jobs. However, the recent recruitment for a Co-ordinator will give the group the capacity to drive things forward at speed from now on.

MGS activity in response to ESSM

MGS recognises the continuous legacies and impact that empire and colonialism have on our institutions and their collections and the people working in as well as visiting them. We are working to embed an anti-racist approach. As the national development body, it is our responsibility to lead by example, actively engaging in anti-racism work ourselves, and to encourage and support museums to challenge and critically interrogate their own practices and collections.

A key part of our response has been to develop and lead the follow-on project, [Delivering Change](#), funded by The National Lottery Heritage Fund, People's Postcode Lottery, Esmée Fairbairn Foundation and the Scottish Government. It is a collective effort between MGS and partnering museums, galleries, and community groups to restructure as organisations based on anti-oppressive principles.

Delivering Change recognises that museums have played a part in excluding the experiences and histories of many of Scotland's people and communities. The MGS Delivering Change team continues to work with museums to develop the skills they need to work with communities in a way that respects and values people and their experiences.

The three strands of the Delivering Change programme are:

- Museum Transformers, a free anti-oppression programme that aims to empower a museum's whole organisation to start their journey towards becoming organisations based on anti-oppressive principles.
- Museum Activists, a free anti-oppression programme for individuals within the museum's workforce offering training and support to help all people to access culture.
- Community Catalysts, supporting eight community groups to connect with one of the Museum Transformers we're working with. The Delivering Change team will work with the community group and their museum partner to help explore the group's idea and gain the tools to make it happen.

We have created a [short animation](#) to help describe Delivering Change.

In response to Recommendation 5, work is in progress to support **decolonising the Curriculum**. We continue to guide museum sector on how to engage with The Race Equality and Anti-Racism Education Programme which aims to articulate and embed anti-racism in school life with support from the Scottish Government and Education Scotland. MGS is supporting museums to develop closer links with schools, colleges and learning practitioners in their local areas and to ensure involvement of the voices of young people especially those who have experience racism in the development of learning programmes and resources. Mechanisms include the Strategic Learning Forum, and the Bletcher Together

sessions run in partnership with Education Scotland. Regional working can be supported through the geographic forums, some of whom already run collective learning programmes.

Repatriation

The ESSM project found that consultation with those who experience racism within Scotland strongly indicates that restitution and repatriation of unethically acquired museum collections is an essential step in addressing the legacies of empire colonialism and historic slavery.

Examples of repatriation from Scottish collections in recent years include the return of a Benin bronze from the University of Aberdeen and the rematriation of the House of Ni'isjoohl memorial pole by National Museums Scotland.

The Scottish Government has asked Museums Galleries Scotland to coordinate the development of repatriation guidance to support Scottish museums. A working group made up of colleagues from across the sector with experience in making returns has been established, with resources being created as learning grows.

Decolonisation activity in Scotland's museums and galleries

Museums and galleries across Scotland are undertaking work to decolonise their displays and programming. Some of this work commenced prior to the ESSM recommendations with many projects supported by grant funding from MGS. Examples include the redevelopment of the David Livingstone Birthplace Museum, Curating Discomfort at the Hunterian Museum (University of Glasgow), Glasgow – City of Empire exhibition at Kelvingrove, and Reveal and Connect, a partnership of museums reviewing world cultures collections.

Scottish Government response

The Scottish Government recently reaffirmed its support for ESSM through a video message from the Cabinet Secretary at a parliamentary reception hosted by MGS. A short blog summarising what was said at the reception is [here](#).

What is needed to progress

The work to deliver the ESSM Recommendations will require long term commitment. It will also require significant resources to enable the scale of change required for Scotland's museums to truly serve all of Scotland's people.

The ESSM Steering Group recommended that an initial £5m was required to take forward Recommendation 1. To date £200,000 has been allocated (£100,000 for the Steering Group) - further resources are required to meaningfully deliver this work.

MGS has clear responsibilities to support the sector to respond to the ESSM recommendations. We have reported elsewhere on the fragility of the sector, but we also see a clear desire and recognition of the urgency by the sector to do this work.

MGS faces a need to balance how we resource our support to the sector to do this work against other priorities and core tasks set out in our grant letter. Meeting the recommendations cannot be absorbed by a static core budget. Current activity is supported by a restricted fund and by project grants for Delivering Change.

Scotland in context

Members may wish to know how Scotland's activity on this subject compares to other countries.

This year, the Welsh Government published an [action plan](#) to become an anti-racist nation by 2030. Recognising the potential for museums to contribute to achieving this goal, they have committed £5m in multi-year grant funding for 2022-2025 to support this, including funding for arm's length bodies and local, regional, and grassroots organisations. Evidence gathered from the programme of grant funding shows there has been a notable shift towards increased engagement and participation with Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic people.

In England, a major capital investment will see the development of the world's first museum dedicated to transatlantic slavery, alongside the redevelopment of the Liverpool Maritime Museum at a total cost of £58m.

The UK-wide Museums Association membership body has its own [anti-racism campaign](#), with key figures from Scotland among those advising on decolonisation, and organisations including Museums and Galleries Edinburgh signed up to become anti-racist museums.