

# **Empire, Slavery and Scotland's Museums steering group recommendations: Scottish Government Response**

January 2024

## **Empire, Slavery and Scotland's Museums steering group recommendations: Scottish Government Response**

This document presents the Scottish Government response to the recommendations set out in the Empire, Slavery and Scotland's Museums steering group's report.

### **Ministerial Foreword**

I warmly welcome the steering group's report and recommendations. The report is sensitively handled, thoroughly researched, and the recommendations set out how to address the challenges facing the sector.

The recommendations are for the sector, for Museums Galleries Scotland and for the Scottish Government. The response below focuses on the proposals that were set out for the Scottish Government.

The actions suggested by these recommendations made me reflect on how the Scottish Government is working for the people of Scotland. We have to continue working hard, within our devolved areas, to deliver real, tangible benefits for all the people whom we serve. It is vital that we never lose sight of the overall purpose of our work – to create a fairer Scotland, which improves the lives of those who live, work and visit here. Whether it is through increasing opportunities by applying Fair Work principles, or the Scottish Child Payment lifting children out of poverty we are determined to treat all people with dignity, fairness and respect.

Scotland also has ambitions to demonstrate good global citizenship. Part of that means being honest and acknowledging our role in historic slavery and colonisation, and also in considering the ethics of the objects we display and hold. Building peaceful outcomes, engaging in honest transparent dialogue and encouraging education.

These recommendations are a crucial step on the journey that Scotland is taking as a society and will continue to take, which will interrogate who we are as a nation, and accept the role that we have held in shaping the past. We are determined to acknowledge and learn from our past and the role Scotland played in the transatlantic slave trade. We need to be a forward-looking nation, but one that must reflect on the inequalities and injustices that have shaped, and continue to shape, our current world. It is also important to acknowledge that when we refer to historic slavery, we are including within that term the abhorrent practice of chattel slavery, which defined individuals, and their offspring, as pieces of property.

It is important that everyone in Scotland is aware of how the legacies of empire, colonialism and historic slavery have created our society today. I am optimistic that there is much work that will be enabled by these recommendations, and that the work already underway will be amplified and enhanced.

This project invites museums in Scotland to ensure that collections, interpretation, human resource and education/outreach work takes a firm anti-racism approach, in line with Scottish Government strategy. Museums tell our national, and local stories,

and are uniquely placed to inform and challenge us. We want them to be inclusive places where we can celebrate all the people of Scotland and enable us to interrogate our colonial and slavery histories.

The recommendations were formed from the results of the largest national study of attitudes to museums and racism undertaken in Scotland. The collation of this body of evidence is to be highly commended. It clearly establishes the needs and wishes of the communities which experience racism, as well as the views of museum and gallery experts and the wider public.

In the response below, the Scottish Government's answer is set out for each of the recommendations and explains how we intend to progress work to support and develop this vital work in Scotland. Some of the recommendations are more challenging than others, and will take more time to deliver, or will require some further exploration.

I am greatly humbled by the enormous personal effort of each member of the Empire, Slavery and Scotland's Museums steering group. A great deal of time, energy and sensitivity has been invested to help us improve the cultural offering in Scotland. Not just for groups that have experienced marginalisation and under-representation for far too long, but for everyone in Scotland as we seek to reduce the harms of systemic racism, decolonise our cultural spaces and to be clear about Scotland's role in the British Empire and the harmful legacy of colonisation.

It is important also that we acknowledge the work that got us to this point, with many different voices that have contributed. I thank them all. Looking at established institutions, collections or practices with fresh eyes and thinking in new ways is not always easy or comfortable, however it is necessary.

Mainstreaming action to tackle deep-rooted racism is reflected across cultural organisations and we can see new sector strategies emerging which aim to deliver towards similar outcomes. It is central in Scotland's Museums and Galleries Strategy which identifies increasing inclusivity of our organisations as a key driving force for change. The aim to create safe, inclusive spaces with an emphasis on co-development, co-production, and co-delivery will be essential to improving connections with communities and increasing the capability and resilience of staff. National Museums Scotland's strategic plan for 2022-27 similarly has a key strategic aim of increasing the diversity of its audience and ensuring that more people can find relevance in its collections and connections with their stories.

I am determined that these recommendations, and this response to them, is not the endpoint of this work, and fully acknowledge that there is still a great deal of work to be done in order for us to get closer to our vision of the Scotland that we want to be. By taking these steps, however, we are advancing towards a more inclusive and equitable future which will see our many talented and valued communities better represented and visible in our cultural spaces.

By encouraging people or groups who experience racism to be better represented and therefore more engaged in heritage and culture, we will hope to see benefits in relation to social cohesion, reduced levels of isolation, the realisation of untapped

creative potential and undiscovered talent whilst fostering good relationships at a community level across the country.

I look forward to seeing where and how this work evolves and inspires, and learning more about the lives that it will enrich. I encourage all who work in Scotland's museums sector to actively engage with and contribute to this work, and for the public to do so too. I want this work to build towards the vision we have for Scotland and continue to reflect who we are as a nation, the rich, warm, respectful and welcoming people that I am proud to belong to. We cannot change the past, but we can change the consequences of that past for everyone in Scotland.

**Christina McKelvie**

Minister for Culture, Europe and International Development

**Project inception and timeline**

This project would not be possible without the many decades of activism against racism both in Scotland and across the world. In this section we are summarising the actions within the Scottish Government which more directly led to this sector specific project.

The Race Equality Framework for Scotland 2016 to 2030, published in 2016 and produced in development with the Coalition for Racial Equality and Rights, sets out the Scottish Government's approach to promoting and progressing anti-racism work which tackles racism and inequality. A key strand of this framework relates to the participation and representation of people who experience racism across political, community and public life.

On 10 June 2020 a motion was raised in the Scottish Parliament to show solidarity with anti-racism, which was passed with an amendment that Scotland should 'establish a slavery museum to address our historic links to the slave trade.'

In September 2020 the Scottish Government published our Programme for Government in which we agreed:

'Partnering with Museums Galleries Scotland, in collaboration with race equality and museums sector stakeholders, we will sponsor an independent expert group to make recommendations on how Scotland's existing and future museum collections we can better recognise and represent a more accurate portrayal of Scotland's colonial and slavery history and what further steps should be taken to ensure people in Scotland are aware of the role Scotland played and how that manifests itself in our society today. This will include how to reflect, interpret and celebrate the wide ranging and positive contributions that ethnic minority communities have made and continue to make to Scotland.'

As a result, the Scottish Government successfully partnered with Museums Galleries Scotland and anti-racism, decolonisation and museum sector stakeholders to deliver the Empire, Slavery and Scotland's Museums project. This project aimed to identify

the ways we can reinterpret aspects of our hidden or contested heritage, to present a more accurate, complete picture of the past.

In 2021 the Coalition for Race Equality and Rights (CRER) conducted a review of Scottish Government race equity and found inequalities persisted in cultural participation for people who experience racism. While this project has provided a deliberate shift in the way our cultural places welcome and represent the breadth of the diverse communities who call Scotland home, it is important to understand that this is only part of the wider solution.

In June 2022, the ESSM project concluded and as a result its six recommendations were published on the Museums Galleries Scotland website.

### **What is already being done in Scotland's museums to understand Scotland's role in Empire and Historic Slavery**

Before addressing each recommendation specifically, it is important to acknowledge the considerable scale of work which has already been completed to allow us to reach this point of understanding of the complexities of Scotland's links with colonialism and historic slavery. The museum sector's readiness to lead and drive this work forward, often within a challenging financial landscape is evident in the many projects in this area which is built upon the extensive action that anti-racism campaigners have constructed over many decades.

From Paxton Trust in Berwick to Comann Eachdraidh Uibhist a Tuath in the Outer Hebrides, museums have made international connections to share stories of Scotland's links to empire and historic slavery. Over in Blantyre, the David Livingstone Birthplace is re-examining his work within the complex and painful realities of slavery and colonialism. The National Trust for Scotland is 'Facing Our Past', researching and uncovering the legacies of slavery in their properties. While, Edinburgh and Glasgow have also committed to researching and sharing their connections to the legacies of slavery and empire in their cities' museums. The Hunterian initiative 'Curating Discomfort' explored anti-racist interventions in museum practices to begin addressing historic power imbalances and confront the celebration of white supremacy in collections. In Glasgow Life, Changemakers – Our Shared Cultural Heritage, a youth-led group, has been giving their views and aspirations to make positive institutional changes in the way the Museums represent communities affected by British colonisation.

Scotland's willingness to reflect on our colonial history and its complex legacies is also reflected in the recent decision by National Museums Scotland to return the House of Ni'isjoohl Memorial Pole to its homeland in the Nisga'a Nation in British Columbia, Canada.

There is an Annex with further examples of good practice from across the sector which demonstrates the ongoing commitment from museums and galleries across Scotland to provide more accurate interpretation and decolonise collections.

## Recommendation one

*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 Scottish Government accepts this recommendation, whilst acknowledging that the requested financial commitment for the Scottish Government is currently unachievable.

The Scottish Government agrees that a dedicated space is required to address our role in empire, colonialism and historic slavery. The Scottish Government also understands the need for a new organisation to be created and led by people with relevant lived experience of racism and colonial legacies, and professional expertise. This will build trust, representation and diversity into all aspects of the planning stages and demonstrates the resulting need for a future organisation to retain independence from existing organisations in the sector.

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 steering group report recommended an initial financial commitment from the Scottish Government of £5 million over the next four years, that the Scottish Government should commit to long-term funding for this organisation, and that the current Empire, Slavery and Scotland's Museums steering group should expand its membership to act as a transitory board until the new organisation is established.

The Scottish Government 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. The new organisation would be expected to assist the sector to progress toward the actions recommended by the steering group report.

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.

With regard to a permanent space, this is a longer-term aspiration. In the meantime, as the evidence in the steering group's report showed, individuals also want local and relevant stories. While the scale and scope of the new organisation and any permanent space is being explored, a blended approach is encouraged, as is set out in the steering group's recommendations. This may comprise the use of both an innovative and inclusive digital offering as well as temporary physical solutions

delivered in partnership, consideration could also be made to ensure there is appropriate national and local reach and engagement.

## **Recommendation two**

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

The Scottish Government accepts this recommendation.

This recommendation reflects the Scottish Government view that our cultural spaces should be inclusive and equally welcoming to all the people of Scotland. In the Culture Strategy for Scotland, published in March 2022 the Vision for Scotland states.

*‘Shared cultural experiences foster inclusivity, creativity and understanding. Everyone should have the opportunity to participate in, develop and enjoy culture which, in turn, helps individuals and communities to thrive in Scotland.’*

Much of the detail of this recommendation is for Museums Galleries Scotland and individual museums to deliver, through increasing training for staff to embed anti-racism approaches. This will however need financial support to set up and deliver.

This will require a significant culture change across our organisations. There are a number of methods which may be used to deliver this recommendation. There could be steps taken to increase the diversity across all grades of museum staff, including Board members, improving the ability of people to pursue cultural opportunities. The Scottish Government would like to see more accurate interpretations of new and existing collections to adequately contextualise empire and historic slavery in our history. This work is both necessary and vital to ensure there is appropriate representation and recognition of our colonial past.

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.

### **Recommendation three**

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

The Scottish Government accepts this recommendation.

The Scottish Government is greatly encouraged by this recommendation. It is accepted that, in the past, Government approaches to addressing racial inequality and other associated impacts of the legacy of colonialism have been short-term or project-based which have contributed towards tokenistic or superficial action which can be understood as a mechanism of systemic racism in operation. The Scottish Government is determined that this work will create real, sustainable improvement for our sector and for all the people of Scotland.

For this work to move forward with authenticity, and to place lived experience at the heart of what we do collaborative partnerships are vital. Open, trusting relationships are key to advancing understanding and acceptance of the inherent systemic racism that remains in our cultural spaces. Involving anti-racism and decolonisation experts, those with curatorial experience and those from local communities with lived experience of racism in our plans will help to deliver more accurate, relevant and meaningful cultural experiences for everybody.

As is reflected in both Scotland's Museums and Galleries Strategy and National Museums Scotland Strategy, 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 funding to support the "Delivering Change" project that is set out in the response to recommendation two will also support delivery of this recommendation.

### **Recommendation four**

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

The Scottish Government accepts this recommendation.

The evidence gathered during the project demonstrated the need for recontextualising collections to consider the role of transatlantic historic slavery or colonialism for the objects that we hold. 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 Scottish Government acknowledges the scale of this task for the sector. This cannot be achieved immediately and will need to be an ongoing area of work, with time required to establish best practice. While there will be opportunities for all museums in Scotland to consider how to approach this decolonising work, we would like to see the sharing of knowledge and experiences strengthen improvements in this area.

It is positive to learn through the ESSM consultation that our existing, hard-working, museum sector workers expressed their enthusiasm to participate in this work, although sharing valid concerns about lack of specific knowledge relating to systemic racism and decolonisation.

The Scottish Government will support this recommendation through our ongoing funding of Museums Galleries Scotland, and we expect the new organisation to have a role in guiding and supporting this work across the sector. The funding provided to support the “Delivering Change” project that is set out in the response to recommendation two will also support delivery of this recommendation.

### **Recommendation five**

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

The Scottish Government accepts this recommendation, and will consider, in partnership with Education Scotland, the further development of relationship building between international organisations and schools and education agencies in Scotland, to advance this work. This will consider existing relationships through the British Council and with Scottish Government’s international development partner countries – Malawi, Zambia, Rwanda and Pakistan.

This recommendation aligns with the Scottish Government’s Anti-Racism in Education programme (AREP) of work which identifies the important role of the education curriculum in promoting race equality and embedding anti-racism across learning and teaching. The Curriculum workstream of the AREP seeks to include the historical and current influence on society and culture of people of colour and people who have been targeted by racism. The role of Scotland in colonial history, and the impact this has had on the modern world, should also feature to ensure our young people understand the impact of colonialism, empire and historic slavery.

The Principles for an Anti-Racist Curriculum, “Breaking the Mould”, articulate the aspirations and expectations from the perspective of children and young people and educators and leaders. Museums have a clear collaborative role in both the principle to “understand and enquire into Scotland’s role in historical world events, including transatlantic historic slavery and colonial histories, and their continuing impact today” and in exemplifying the rich and diverse communities in Scotland and beyond and past and present events that amplify under-represented perspectives and stories.

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.

### **Recommendation six**

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

The Scottish Government accepts this recommendation.

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.

Open, respectful and transparent conversations are required to provide the foundation of any successful repatriation discussions, which would best consider the specific complexity and detail of each item on a case-by-case basis, all of which would need to work within existing legal frameworks and abide by international law.

This is a complex and sensitive area. Some of the levers around repatriation of objects are reserved to UK Government. However, the Scottish Government is working with partners to identify any barriers to repatriation that are within its control and will seek to find routes to remove these.

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

However, the Scottish Government is committed to opening discussions with anti-racism and decolonisation experts, building on knowledge from the communities of origin, from communities affected by racism and by the removal of objects. This will be done alongside experts in the museum sector to consider the format and scope of bespoke national guidance in Scotland to offer support for items with contested histories.

We recognise the importance of bringing in specific anti-racism expertise for this process as we demonstrate our commitment to national repatriation guidance which will provide a set of guiding principles to consider repatriation that is fit for purpose with both national and international communities.

## **Concluding remarks**

The Scottish Government accepts that developing an anti-racism and decolonising approach in our museums will take time and a structured strategic focus. This work is vital to ensure that Scotland combats the institutional racism which has marked the establishment of our cultural places.

As a society we need to enact meaningful change to allow all the people who live in Scotland to feel welcome and represented in our cultural spaces and to flourish in the educational and creative opportunities they offer. We want our museum sector to demonstrate the core values of our modern and progressive nation that can honestly confront its past, represent an accurate account of our histories and seek a better future for everyone who lives, works and visits Scotland.

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.

We believe that by building anti-racism and decolonisation into the sector we are forming a clearer vision of the Scotland we want to be. By supporting museum staff, undertaking reinterpretation, and awareness of systemic racism, we can drive tangible results for honest, inclusive cultural offerings and experiences for all the people in Scotland.

## **Links to key documents and other strategies**

Culture Strategy for Scotland –

<https://www.gov.scot/publications/culture-strategy-scotland>

Race Equality Framework for Scotland 2016-2030 -

<https://www.gov.scot/publications/race-equality-framework-scotland-2016-2030/>

Race Equality Immediate Priorities Plan –

<https://www.gov.scot/publications/immediate-priorities-plan-race-equality-scotland/documents/>

Breaking the mould: Principles for an anti-racist curriculum –

<https://education.gov.scot/resources/breaking-the-mould-principles-for-an-anti-racist-curriculum/>

Promoting race equality and anti-racist education –

<https://education.gov.scot/resources/promoting-race-equality-and-anti-racist-education/>

Empire, Slavery and Scotland's Museums Recommendations –

<https://www.museumsgalleriesscotland.org.uk/project/empire-slavery-scotlands-museums/>

Scotland's Museum and Galleries Strategy

<https://www.museumsgalleriesscotland.org.uk/strategy-hub/>

National Museums Scotland Strategic Plan 2022-2027

<https://www.nms.ac.uk/about-us/our-organisation/strategy/strategic-plan-2022-27/>

## Examples to demonstrate sector working towards each Recommendation

On a city-wide scale rather than a national approach, an important positive development in connection to the first recommendation is the creation of a dedicated space to explore “Glasgow and Empire” in Kelvingrove Art Gallery and Museum overseen by Glasgow Life. The Scottish Government would welcome other local and regional initiatives to best tailor exhibits and collections within the context of their local communities.

An example of our museums working in partnership is the Exchange project led by National Museums Scotland and funded by Arts and Humanities Research Council. Funding was distributed to seven museums to work with African, Caribbean, and South Asian diaspora heritage community members to explore experiences of empire, migration, and life in Britain. The three Scottish museums were Glasgow Life (working with the Bangladesh Association Glasgow and the Our Shared Cultural Heritage programme) David Livingstone Birthplace Museum (working with individuals recruited through job seekers’ platforms) and Edinburgh Museums and Galleries (working with Edinburgh Caribbean Association).

The V&A Dundee’s work to decolonise includes re-writing their object label texts in the Scottish Design Galleries. Input from an advisory group composed of academics, curators and people with lived experience of racism enabled the museum to acknowledge the transnational histories of these objects and unpack Scotland’s involvement in colonialism and transatlantic slavery.

In Education, there are specific examples of collaboration including: the National Museums Scotland resource, created in partnership with educators, to support the learning and teaching of the Transatlantic Slave Trade component of the National 5 qualification; the resources created by the David Livingstone Birthplace Centre designed to introduce anti-racism perspectives to learning and teaching about its history; The Watt Institution collaborating with local education partners to create new resources for teaching about the Transatlantic Slave Trade and its local links and legacies in Inverclyde for use in all secondary schools in the area; and, Glasgow Museums’ involvement in work with Glasgow City Council to create learning and teaching materials for primary and secondary education on the Transatlantic Slave Trade and Glasgow’s role.

In February 2022 in Benin City, Nigeria, a Benin Bronze returned from the University of Aberdeen was handed to the Oba of Benin, 125 years after it had been looted by a British military force. This was world’s first such return from a museum collection and followed two years of discussions with the Court of the Oba, the Nigerian federal government and the Nigerian National Commission on Museums and Monuments to ensure that it was returned in the right way to the right recipient. While this return had a substantial international media impact, museums in Scotland have an established track-record of returns, including the return of a Lakota Ghost Dance Shirt by Glasgow Museums in 1999 and the return of a totem pole to the Nisga’a Nation by National Museums Scotland in 2023, as well as the return of Ancestral human remains by museums over the past three decades.



© Crown copyright 2024



This publication is licensed under the terms of the Open Government Licence v3.0 except where otherwise stated. To view this licence, visit [nationalarchives.gov.uk/doc/open-government-licence/version/3](https://nationalarchives.gov.uk/doc/open-government-licence/version/3) or write to the Information Policy Team, The National Archives, Kew, London TW9 4DU, or email: [psi@nationalarchives.gsi.gov.uk](mailto:psi@nationalarchives.gsi.gov.uk).

Where we have identified any third party copyright information you will need to obtain permission from the copyright holders concerned.

This publication is available at [www.gov.scot](http://www.gov.scot)

Any enquiries regarding this publication should be sent to us at

The Scottish Government  
St Andrew's House  
Edinburgh  
EH1 3DG

ISBN: 978-1-83521-884-6 (web only)

Published by The Scottish Government, January 2024

Produced for The Scottish Government by APS Group Scotland, 21 Tennant Street, Edinburgh EH6 5NA  
PPDAS1407694 (01/24)

W W W . g o v . s c o t